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Joel Damian

Loyola University Chicago

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NOVEL TECHNIQUE AS EXEMPLIFIED IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S

MOBY DICK

by

Brother Joel Damian, F.S.C.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS IN LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

April

1946

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PREFACE

Until a very few years ago Herman Melville was almost totally disregarded as an author worthy of note in the field of American literature. Melville himself lamented once in a letter to his friend Hawthorne, "Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, anyway; but to go down as a 'man who lived among cannibals!'"¹ Because of his personal antagonism to the public, the man who in his early life as an author had been reasonably successful, fell into an almost complete literary oblivion which was not rectified until his "discovery" that occurred around 1919, the centenary of his death.

References to him that appeared from time to time in manuals of literary history are interesting:

John Nichol, in 1882, dismissed Melville from his British survey of American letters with ten words, as a mere traveler. Four years later, Richardson, in his two-volume history, which devoted forty-seven pages to Longfellow and sixty to Hawthorne, gave him a scant half-page - as a mere panderer for popularity. As the opening of the new century, Barrett Wendell in his Harvardocentric survey which accorded to Holmes eighteen pages, summed him up in forty words and these chiefly to combat Stevenson's praise. Higginson did not mention the man; Abernethy alluded to him simply as "another forgotten New York novelist." A moment of curiosity was created in the eighties by Stevenson and Charles Russell, but they dwelt solely upon his realism, his ability to transport his reader to the forecandle of a ship at sea; they did not sense the true powers of the man.²

Literary critics today do not follow that almost total oblivion. It is

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- 1 Herman Melville, as quoted in "Centennial of Herman Melville," by R. M. Weaver, Nation, Vol. CIX (1919), p. 145.
 - 2 F. F. Pattee, "Herman Melville," American Mercury, Vol. X (1927), p. 10.

now not uncommon to find Herman Melville ranked with the four or five greatest names in nineteenth century American literature: Poe, Whitman, Hawthorne, Twain, James. This change has come about by a recognition of the great things Melville has introduced into the American scene and because of what he accomplished.

Melville is one of the greatest and most unusual geniuses of our native literature on three counts: first, he was the literary discoverer of the South Seas; second, he pictured life as it happened in the ship's forecastle; and third, he was the author of Moby Dick.³

On the first two counts one has only to recall that the first literature, in order of chronology, in both England and America that dealt thoroughly with the South Seas was Melville's and that he is second to none in his realistic and accurate description of life at sea. Stevenson, C. W. Stoddard, John La Farge, Jack London, Somerset Maugham, James Matthew Barrie, all followed him historically and linguistically. And Conrad, Kipling, and Masfield must admit him their master when he is "at sea" in his books.

To demonstrate that Melville was a literary genius on the score of Moby Dick alone is the problem of this study. On May 18, 1921, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, then eighty, in a letter to his lifelong friend, Sir Frederick Pollock, wrote: "Did I mention Moby Dick, by Herman Melville? I remember him in my youth. It seemed to me a great book. . .but I should think a much greater man. It shook me up a good deal. It is wonderful already that a book published in 1851 doesn't seem thin, now. Hawthorne did

3 R. M. Weaver, "Herman Melville," Bookman, Vol. LIV (1921), pp. 323-4.

when last I read The Scarlet Letter. Not so Moby Dick."4 The judicial mind of Justice Holmes, while not that of the professional literary critic, is to be respected, particularly at his age. By common agreement among readers of the past twenty-five years Moby Dick is one of the great books of the world. "It does not 'seem thin, now' any more than in 1921 it seemed thin to the lucky Balboas and Columbuses who then rediscovered its Pacific rhythms and Atlantic rages."5

A further fact on the book's greatness is that there is no end in sight yet of commentary on it. A good minor work is simple and clear, its meaning is easily understood; but a great work is complex and always lends itself to new meaning. The greatest books rise from such great depths that they underlie all the levels common to humanity in all times and climes. In the Bible, in Shakespeare, a single reading is not sufficient to grasp the complete meaning of a passage or chapter. So with Herman Melville's Moby Dick--a single reading stirs the depths of human emotion, but it is not sufficient to discover all the meaning hidden under the allegory of Captain Ahab's mad struggle with the mighty forces of brute nature at war with him in the person of Moby Dick, the white whale.

Moby Dick puts before the reader a twofold problem: of meaning or allegory and of technique, and upon both of these rests Melville's reputation as a novelist of genius. That the meaning of Moby Dick's symbolism is not always lucid and universally accepted is evident from this excerpt from Lewis

4 O. W. Holmes, as quoted in "Herman Melville," by Clifton Fadiman, Atlantic Vol. CLXXII (1943), p. 88.

5 Clifton Fadiman, Ibid., p. 88.

Mumford written in 1929:

For three-quarters of a century Moby Dick has suffered at the hands of the superficial critic; it has been condemned because to one man it seemed confused; to another it was not a novel; to a third the characters were not "real"; and to a fourth it was merely a weird, mystical, impossible tale of dubious veracity, an example of Bedlam literature; while to a fifth, it was just a straightforward account of the whaling industry, marred by a crazy captain and an adventitious plot.⁶

As for the novel's technique, the same controversy of opinion has been in vogue as witnessed in the above quotation.

Moby Dick is a great book. It brought back into American scene a sense of values that had been lacking in the pert writing of the first half of the eighteenth century. Melville's was the task of bringing back to a self-satisfied America a sense of the tragic in life. That his generation did not receive his message is no reflection upon the value of his book. One of the proofs of great literature is that it can stand the test of time and be valuable a century after its writing. Moby Dick is that today.

Herman Melville shares with Walt Whitman the distinction of being the greatest imaginative writer America has produced: his epic novel is one of the supreme poetic monuments of his age and the revelation of his depth of experience is a record that meets the standards of the greatest literature. It is the purpose of this paper to show that, and examining its meaning and purpose and technique to posit the fact that Moby Dick is one of the "great" books of American literature, and that consequently, its author, Herman Melville, is one of the "greats" among our American novelists.

6 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929, p. 177.

CHAPTER ONE

ESSENTIALS OF THE NOVEL

Before one can launch out into an analysis of the meaning and technique of Moby Dick, it is necessary to draw up a few workable standards or criteria about which to write for the purpose of clarity and against which one can weigh a given work to judge its value. Therefore, to aid in a more logical discussion of Melville's artistic skill as a novelist, it is the intention of this chapter to draw up a plan of attack upon the subject.

While it is true that Moby Dick professes to be a novel, and hence the criteria proposed should necessarily be those of the novel, it will be well to start this discussion by a more general study of art and the artist. From the earliest times there has always been a twofold aspect of art that has been recognized by all critics and authors: that the work of art, if it is really and truly art, has two standars to meet: the message and the form in which that message is conveyed. Whether the artist be painter, sculptor, poet, architect, these two criteria must be examined. No one will deny that there is a purpose in the artist's work whether it be announced or not. Dickens' message was that of social reform; Harriet Beecher Stowe's, abolition of slavery; Kiplin, the praise of empire, etc. Even such men as the schools of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Walter Pater had a "purpose", though they professed a doctrine, the later particularly, of "art-for-art's-sake". No human being lives in a vacuum. He must as necessarily as he breathes, have some sort of reason or purpose for his actions.

In the case of the artist it is his message, consciously or unconsciously stated. Once the painting is finished, or the poem is written, or the novel is completed, it is the task of the critic to step in and judge whether the message of the artist has been conveyed in the correct form and whether that form follows certain criteria that lend themselves to true art in that particular type of artistry.

As in the case of every other fine art, the student to prose fiction finds himself occupied with questions concerning content and form, and their relations to each other. Back of every art product there is a conception, vaguely or definitely present in the artist's mind. Upon the character of this conception or content depends the significance of the work of art; its formal beauty depends upon the artist's skill effectively to express his thought or feeling in the terms of the particular medium which he has chosen.¹

The criteria we set up for the novel, therefore, are twofold: first, the message or purpose of the author must be worthy of delivery to mankind, and second, the technique of the author in handling the choice of medium and the standards of that medium must be artistic.

In a sense the artist is no different from the rest of mankind whose supreme search has been that of Pilate, "What is truth?" But a fiction writer dare not turn away before he receives an answer. His method of thought is the same, but his subject matter is different. His theme is human life. It is some truth of human life that he endeavors to discover, to understand,

1 Bliss Perry, A Study of Prose Fiction, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1902, p. 20.

and to announce; and in order to complete his work he must apply to human life an attention of thought which is successively scientific, philosophic, and artistic.²

Henry James reiterates this same point: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."³

The artist seeks for truth in life about him. A single event coming under his notice is assimilated as a fact, it gives knowledge of the event, but he goes farther. Not satisfied with the mere fact of the event's happening, he goes to the general truth underlying the concrete fact. All human science is an endeavor to discover the truths which underlie the facts that we perceive: all human philosophy is an endeavor to understand and appraise those truths when once they are discovered: all human art is an endeavor to utter them clearly and effectively when once they are appraised and understood.

Great art, according to Arthur DuBois, is expected to have five ingredients: experience from the author in living; a mature point of view; a sensitiveness in the author; articulateness within the limitations of the art; and a fusion of all these into a whole(some)ness.⁴

Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt. It requires of the artist every ounce of his care. True, its

2 C. M. Hamilton, The Manual of the Art of Fiction, New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1927, p. 6.

3 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," Partial Portraits, London: MacMillan and Co., 1888, p. 278.

4 Arthur E. DuBois, "The Art of Fiction," South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. XL (1941), p. 112.

subject is life, but more particularly it is someone's apprehension of the experience of it so that it removes the waste and muddlement and bewilderment in it and gives it lucid, intelligible form so that the successful application of it is a delightful spectacle.⁵

In a study of this nature it is important to keep in mind that one of the things that must be shown about Moby Dick is that truthfulness in the sense of true to life is absolutely necessary if the novel is to have any claim to immortality. In every period of literature clever authors have appeared who diverted their contemporaries with ingenious invention, brilliant incident, or alluring style, but they have not survived because they failed to tell the truth.

It is important that fiction be accepted as one of the fine arts. Mr. Besant in an address in London some years ago insisted upon this fact: "Fiction is an art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the arts of painting, sculpture, music, and poetry."⁶ It is impossible to insist too much on so important a truth.

As in any other art whose purpose is to abstract the general truths of life, the purpose of fiction is to embody certain truths of human life in a series of imagined facts. Every novelist of genuine importance seeks not merely to divert but to instruct his reader by presenting characters and actions which are true. The novelist forsakes the realm of fact in order that he may better tell the truth, and lures the reader away from actualities in

5 R. P. Blackmur, The Art of the Novel, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934, intro., p. xv.

6 Sir Walter Besant, The Art of Fiction, New York: Bretano's, 1902, pp. 5-6.

order to present him with realities.⁷

Just as we feel by instinct the reality of fiction at its best, so also we feel the falsity of fiction when the author lapses from the truth. For example, unless his characters act and think at all points consistently with the laws of his imagined life, we cannot bring ourselves to believe the story. And unless we believe his story, his purpose in writing will have failed; it will not be great art. There must always be, as Bliss Perry puts it, an air of probability in each and every event of the story.⁸ A novel exists solely to represent life. When that fails, it has no claim to greatness.

On the part of the author fiction requires the power of description, truth and fidelity, observation, selection, clearness of perception and of outline, dramatic sense, directness of purpose, beauty of workmanship, and a profound belief on the part of the story teller in the reality of his story.⁹

By way of definition, a novel, in line with what has been said above, is universally accepted as a large diffused picture comprehending the characters of life. It is a personal, direct impression of life which gets its value from the execution of that picture by the artist, the novelist. That of Francis Marion Crawford considering the reader is quite inclusive: the novel is an intellectual, artistic luxury in that it should appear to the

7 C. M. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 4.

8 Bliss Perry, op. cit., p. 142.

9 Sir Walter Besant, op. cit., p. 13.

intellect, should satisfy the requirements of art, and should conduce to the peace and delectation of man during his hours of leisure.¹⁰ Nothing is better known to us than life, and in the novel this is our standard. We should first "realize" the life of the novel and then, using our taste, judge whether it is true, vivid, convincing--like life in fact.

But to translate life into "reality" is a rather difficult process in as far as it is rather difficult to lay down any hard and fast rules according to which the novel must be written. There are certain principles which can be demonstrated but there is no body of laws in the art of the novel as there is in the art of the poem as expressed in treatises on poetics from Aristotle's day to our own. Moreover, as Henry James points out, "the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting."¹¹

Also before the question of technique be taken up, it is well to bear in mind the following injunction:

The question of technique is not the only one with which the novel is concerned. There is a power of genius, of mastery over human thought, of fire and poetry and splendor, which far transcends technique. There have been true masterworks of fiction that abounded in errors of form; and one can conceive the possibility, though scarce the probability, that a technically perfect novel might still be a cold and tedious one. This caution does

10 Francis Marion Crawford, The Novel: What Is It? New York: MacMillan and Co., 1893, pp. 9-10.

11 Henry James, op. cit., p. 384.

not, however, contradict my proposition that the question of technique is of the first importance, and that a clear understanding of it must vastly increase the pleasure of reading and the chances of success in writing.¹²

The first consideration in technique is that of classifying the novel according to type. While no iron-clad division is possible that definitely states where one novel begins and another ends, without encroachment on the other, it is possible to classify the general divisions of the novel. Of course, the novelist, before he begins, has a great number of questions of technique and artistry to settle. Where shall he begin and how? Shall he adopt the analytic method or the dramatic; that is, shall he pick his characters apart, or only show the outside; describe feelings and their causes, or only actions and impressions. Shall he prefer dialogue or narrative? Shall he speak in his own person to make comments, and if so shall he appear unobtrusively like Dickens, or in the style dotted with "I's" like Thackeray? Shall he keep wholly aloof from the entire tale, or shall he swing to the other extreme and pose as a character within it? If the latter, shall he be the hero, or a minor figure acting as a sort of chorus? Or shall he, by adopting the device of a series of letters or larger detached narratives, become every character in turn? In brief what is the best, or the least awkward, "form" to assume?

As defined above the novel is essentially a presentation of life as seen in the "realities" of life. But to present that life, an almost infinite series of methods is possible. Perhaps the following list, recalling that the

12 C. F. Horne, The Technique of the Novel, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1908, p. 112.

purpose of this chapter is to lay down essentials and criteria against which to weigh Moby Dick, is inclusive: the picaresque novel, the novel of action, the novel of character, and the novel of drama. While it is true, with perhaps the exception of the picaresque novel, action, character and conflict are common to all great novels, it behooves the novelist to make his choice before he starts writing so that his total effect may be the logical result of his selection.

The picaresque novel is the simplest in theme having as its purpose to take a central figure--a "rogue" from the Spanish origin of the term--through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, and thus build up a picture of society. An example of this is Vanity Fair where Becky Sharp runs the gamut of her adventures against the background of early nineteenth century England. The plot is a mere series of incidents which widen and diversify the picture and set the characters in different relations. The artistic in this novel demands that these incidents should arise as naturally as possible.

In a novel of action a trifling event will have unexpected consequences; these will spread, and soon they will be numberless; and apparently inextricable web will be woven which will later be miraculously unravelled. In the action, its complication and its resolution, our interest is taken up. As the figures are roughly characterized, however, the events will evoke responses from them as well as serve to complicate the action. But the action is the main thing, the response of the characters to it incidental, and

always such as to help on the plot.¹³

The novel of character, on the contrary, is not conceived as part of the plot; instead it exists independently, and the action is subservient to it. In this type of novel the characters are usually static, the plot serving merely to bring out the character's attitudes which were there in the beginning.¹⁴

But in the interest of the reader, the indispensable thing in a novel is the story, and that is best shown where the characters are not static, but evolutionary, where there is a gradual change in the character as shown by his reaction to the incidents of the plot. "The highest fiction is that in which action is the result of mental and spiritual forces in play."¹⁵

In this sort of novel, that of character, there is often particularly in the modern novel, a great deal made of the mental development of the characters. A sort of psychological analysis is made by the novelist to portray the evolution of character. In the novels of Henry James this process is perhaps most clearly seen. He consistently tried to make of the novel a distinct literary form, something more than the miscellaneous vehicle of entertainment which it meant to the most gifted Victorians. "A single subject, embodied in a dramatic situation, developed logically, without interruption and without interference, to its inevitable conclusion--this was his

13 E. Muir, The Structure of the Novel, London: Hogarth Press, 1938, p. 20.

14 Ibid., pp. 21-4.

15 Charles D. Warner, Modern Fiction, "Complete Writings of Charles Dudley Warner", Hartford: The American Publishing Co., 1904, Vol. XV, p. 161.

idea of a novel."¹⁶ James Warren Beach, adopting his term from the French "well-made play", called such a novel "the well-made novel."¹⁷

The essential element of such a novel is that of dramatic conflict. The plot is extensive. It begins never with a single figure, but with two or more; it starts from several points on its circumference, which is a complex, not a nucleus, of personal relationships, and works toward the center, towards one action in which all the subsidiary actions are gathered up and resolved. The dramatic novel, while not altering its setting, shows us the complete human range of experience in the actors themselves.

Mr. Beach summarizes the elements of this technique thus:

To the end that the reader may have strongly the sense of the dramatic present in a story, it is a good thing to have a single person for center of interest. It is still better that this person shall play out his part in close limitations of place so as to guard against too frequent change of scene. It is still better that his action, so limited in place, shall be narrowly limited in time so as to provide continuity of effect. And the better to secure such continuity, it is well that the story should be limited to a small number of days whose action is presented, and that the whole period covered, including intervals not presented, should be as short as possible.¹⁸

It now comes time to name certain essentials of the novel to serve as pivots around which to center the discussion of the merits of Moby Dick. In general there are three elements of any work of fiction that possess potential interest, namely, the characters, the plot, and the setting or back-

16 J. W. Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel, New York: D. Appleton Century Co., 1932, p. 307.

17 Ibid., p. 8.

18 Ibid., p. 162.

ground. A story teller shows how certain persons do certain things under certain circumstances. According to his particular purpose any author may emphasize one or the other, or possibly all three of these elements to excite and satisfy the curiosity of the reader.

There are specifically, four more or less essential elements in a Novel:

First, the plot, the story, the connected "action", recognized as of primary importance by every writer of fiction though they differ on its requirements.

Second, verisimilitude, convincingness, truth, not so much to some actually existing occurrence of the plot, but to the law of life which lies behind it.

Third, character portrayal, which exists as an attempt to portray outward or inward difference, as an analysis of character growth under the stress of life.

Fourth, emotional excitement or passion, on the part of the reader.

The novel may also concern itself with:

Fifth, background, the stage setting of the story told upon it.

Sixth, style, the author's control of the devices of rhetoric used to tell the story.

Seventh, purpose, the distinct reason for the book apart from the general purpose of portraying life.

Eighth, intrigue, which may be skipped here because it is a sub-division of plot, whereby the true plot may be concealed by the use of inverted order to arouse the reader's ingenuity and curiosity.¹⁹

19 C. F. Horne, op. cit., p. 20-1.

Another important detail for the attainment of artistic effect is the point of view which the author chooses to relate his story. In a consideration of Moby Dick this is especially important.

The essentials of the novel in the order in which they will be presented in this thesis are: first, plot; second, verisimilitude; third, character portrayal; fourth, background; fifth, point of view; sixth, style; and seventh, emotional excitement. The one other essential mentioned above, purpose, will be treated in this discussion in a separate chapter because in a novel like Moby Dick, which has the element of symbolism and allegory, "purpose" will require a longer presentation and deserves a place by itself to convey the message of Herman Melville.

The first essential of a novel is plot, the story, the most simple form of which is the recording of a succession of events, generally marvelous as, for example, The Famous History of Doctor Faustus. The term "plot" is a definite term; it is a literary term universally applicable. It can be used in the widest popular sense. It designates for everyone, not merely for the critic, the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together. It covers Treasure Island and Tristram Shandy, Wuthering Heights and The Ambassadors, The Three Musketeers and Ulysses. In all these novels a few things happen, and in a certain order, and in every novel things must happen and in a certain order.

The element of "certain order" is important. Horne defines it as "the tracing of a single series of events from their causes through their various

interactions to their consequences."²⁰ And he draws upon the example of Honore Balzac to enhance his argument:

The perfected plot should be threefold. It should lead us to the summit of our climb by an interesting narrative of some series of outward events closing in a catastrophe, by a sympathetic tracing of some great emotion rising to a culmination, and also by a thoughtful study of some unformed character developing through these experiences of life.²¹

The plot of the novel should be regarded as a series of steps. The opening chapter should seek to catch our interest by opening abruptly "in medias res," or by a leisurely presentation of details. Once the interest is caught, the pace of movement should increase more and more rapidly, being raised out of our own existence into an atmosphere of passion and intensity until the result, the catastrophe, comes upon us with a rush. Then the fewer the loose ends that lie around for cleaning up, the better.

An important duty of the novelist is that of simplicity in his plot. The word signifies a weaving together and a weaving together presupposes the existence of more than one strand. Every artist simplifies life, in his own way: by selecting essentials from the helter-skelter details that life presents to him, and then, by arranging these essentials in accordance with a pattern, a thread that weaves through the events of his segment of life.²²

A simple analogy will illustrate what is meant by the term selection. A scene reflected in a mirror or in the finder of a camera is--and the fact is strange--more beautiful than the scene itself. The reason lies in this:

20 Ibid., p. 26.

21 Ibid., p. 138.

22 C. M. Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 61, 67.

the frame of the mirror or finder enables us to concentrate upon a small field. Out of the overwhelming universe, in which attention is forever distracted from a part by multitudinous assaults upon the senses from other parts, a selected group of sense appeals has been arbitrarily delimited. Within the field of the mirror or finder we perceive with more than our usual intensity. The frame is a device which enables us to concentrate, to focus our attention, and thus to apprehend. There is always in any such simplification a kind of beauty. But if the effect is premeditated, if, that is, the photographer in developing his negative, or the painter in composing his picture, eliminates certain details so that others constitute a kind of pattern, the result is even more beautiful.²³ The great novelist must so select his details that there is a skillful weaving of materials that lead to an eloquent catastrophe.

These details, however, must be governed by the laws of their artistic being, and in art this essential, here of the novel, is verisimilitude. Unless the novelist accomplishes this correspondence with life, he has failed as a novelist. Henry James emphasizes this:

The air of reality seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel--the merit on which all its other merits helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist.²⁴

23 Carl Grapo, The Technique of the Novel, intor., pp. xiii-xiv.

24 Henry James, op. cit., p. 390.

While it is true that the events of the novel may not possess "actuality", they are not by that fact falsehoods. The novelist does not assert that his characters exist in life, but only that they act as human beings would under such circumstances as he imagines. "His fidelity is not pledged to the actual truth of the external incident, but to the internal harmony of his thoughts with truth."²⁵ This truth has three aspects: first, the eternal verity of the idea itself; second, the artist's verity of sight in studying and understanding it; and third, the craftsman's technique to give verity of reproduction to the reader. From a combination of all these three virtues comes true verisimilitude. If skillfully done, it carries the reader away and makes him accept, and for an instant live wholly in, the author's world. It becomes evident that what makes a story convincing is not at all the physical actuality of the plot, but the underlying harmony of thought with "reality."

A discussion in order at this point is that of the author's "purpose" in writing. That the desire to express truth should be the chief purpose of the novel, is accepted by critics and novelist, but there may often be some impelling motive, or "purpose," that dominates all other aims in a novel. In most of these novels it has meant passionate devotion to a cause hence lack of self-restraint, exaggeration, for example, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Nicholas Nickleby. The purpose novel stirs up controversy, if it be vigorous enough to have any effect. However, the novel of purpose carries within it this artistic flaw, which may lead it to destruction as a great novel;

25 C. F. Horne, op. cit., p. 165.

but it also has, if well handled, the possibility of passion and energy and earnestness that may go far toward making it a success.²⁶

The third essential of a novel is characterization. Richard Burton in his essay "The Fundamentals of Fiction" says: "If I were forced to pick out the quality ministering most to the successful result, I must reply: Characterization." A novel without salient character drawing, whatever its merits in other directions, can never take high rank.²⁷

In general there are three methods of presenting character: idealized, as in Clarissa and Allworthy; naturally, as in Fielding's chief figures; or caricatured, made whimsically false as in the disputes of Square and Thwackum. The development of character has had the slow advance of unity of plot. This art was wholly unconceived among ancient tale-tellers. Interest in humanity, in the individual as differentiated from his fellows, arose with the Renaissance. In the short stories such as Boccaccio's and in the figures of the picaresque romancer, a thousand figures were presented to the reader, types viewed externally with the emphasis laid upon their external difference, one from another. In a later stage of development writers have sought to look beneath the surface, to depict, not their character's individual difference, but the common laws which underlie this and create it.²⁸

Great fictitious characters are typical of their class to an extent rarely to be noticed in any actual member of the class they typify. But men

26 Ibid., p. 161-2.

27 Richard Burton, "The Fundamentals of Fiction," Forces in Fiction and Other Essays, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1902, p. 6.

28 C. F. Horne, op. cit., p. 167.

so representative are rare in actual life; the chief business of fiction is therefore to supply them. But after he has made them quintessential of a class, he must be careful to individualize them. Unless he endows them with certain personal traits that distinguish them from all other representatives or members of their class, whether actual or fictitious, he will fail to invest them with the illusion of reality. It is through being typical that the character is true; it is through being individual that the character is convincing.²⁹

These first two essential elements, plot and character, working together in verisimilitude, must be presented against a background or setting, the stage props of the conflict between them. This is the fourth essential of the novel: background.

The term background appears a very elastic one. In its strictest sense it applies only to the physical surroundings, the room or landscape, the slate upon which events occur. In connection with the novel the word is commonly employed in a wider artistic meaning, as covering everything that helps to make clear the life surrounding the central figures, the field of existence wherein their action occurs, the "atmosphere." In this broader view every touch which helps to reveal or to impress the environment is background. The cry of the huckster in the street, the heaving of a huge ocean wave in a story, the interpolated soliloquy of the author, even the pictures of minor characters, the conversations which they carry on, the lives they live, each and all of these may aid in bodying forth the life and mind of some central

29 C. M. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 80.

figure. A third and cruder use of the term covers everything in a novel that is neither portraiture nor action. In this sense all divergences, no matter whither they may lead astray, are charitably accepted as belonging to the tale to which they come chance-tied, and are called background.

The skillful author, however, must make careful selection of background to enhance the conflict of his story. He should give only those essentials which enhance the reader's interest and prevent misconception. In the modern novel authors have come to consider that any given story can happen only in a given set of circumstances, and that if the setting be changed the action must be altered and the characters be differently drawn. It is therefore impossible, in the best fiction of the present day, to consider the setting as divorced from the other elements of the narrative. There was a time, to be sure, when description for its own sake existed totally in the novel, and the action halted to permit the introduction of pictorial passages bearing no necessary relation to the business of the story. But the practise of the best contemporary novelists is summed up and expressed by Henry James in this emphatic sentence from his essay "The Art of Fiction": "I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative."³⁰

In this connection the artistic use of background in Moby Dick will require minute examination for the background of the whaling industry takes up a great portion of the novel.

30 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," op. cit., p. 376.

The fifth consideration in the essentials of the novel is that of point of view. In general there are two angles from which the author may look down upon his characters while he is watching the relating their gyrations: internally, where he enters into the mind of one or more of his characters relating the reasons for their actions, or externally, where he remains outside their mind recording action as he sees it from the outside.

An example of the internal point of view is Henry James whose play upon the psychological interaction of his characters makes for the reader's ability of following even the thoughts of the characters. Jane Austen and Walter Scott maintain the external point of view. The former is essentially objective. She depicts the world as she sees it. While she describes character, it is always such as is seen by someone else. The author states the impression made upon the heroine's mind, but never dissects the impression or endeavors to detect on what secret subtle cards emotions have been playing. Scott likewise tends all to incident and animation, to vigor and poetic vision. Analysis is almost wholly foreign to his vehement rush of imagination. Essentially he is a picture-painter who leaves those pictures convey the feelings that underlay the scene.

No one of the points of view may be pronounced absolutely better than the others. But this much may be said dogmatically: there is always one best point of view from which to tell any given short story; and although in planning a novel the author works with far less technical restriction, there is always one best point of view from which to tell a given novel. Therefore it is advisable for the author to determine as early as possible, from a studious consideration of his materials, what is the best point of view

from which to tell the story he is planning, and thereafter to contemplate his narrative from that standpoint and that only.³¹

The interest of art, besides, demands that no matter what the point of view selected, the author consistently maintain it throughout the telling of the story. The breakdown in the point of view selected diseconomizes the attention of the reader. An example in point is Anthony Trollope who in a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only "making believe." He admits that the events he relates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. "Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me," says Henry James, "a terrible crime. . . It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing room."³² In this sort of novel the author attends his scenes as interpreter; and having pointed out each sob, he hints what each may mean or explains just what it cannot mean. Dickens remained aloof and was satisfied with pointing out the meaning; Thackeray pointed out and then went farther to sermonize. While we accept these conventions in the spirit of the times and of the authors, and read them with pleasure as classics, who would listen or tolerate such a technique in a novelist today?

In Moby Dick Melville has selected the first person and hence this point

31 C. M. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 136.

32 Henry James, op. cit., pp. 379-80.

of view deserves brief discussion here. The autobiographical novel has become a standard form for either of three purposes: first, for the display of supreme passion; second, for the romance of mere adventure; third, for a whimsical study of a central figure. The first two usages are in point in Moby Dick.

The use of the first person, no doubt, is a relief to a novelist in the matter of composition. It composes of its own accord, and so he may feel; for the hero gives the story an indefeasible unity by the mere act of telling it. His career may not seem to hang together logically, artistically; but every part of it is at least united with every part by the coincidence of its all belonging to one man.³³

The chief difficulty with this form is that it demands the acceptance of the fancy that the itch to write has seized upon some worthy gentlemen whom it probably never would have touched, and that desire to write miraculously brings with it a professional literary skill.

The next question of essentials is that of style. What is this "style"? Really there are two separate problems involved: one deals with details, with the wording, the phraseology; the other with the general construction, with the method of the entire work.

Language makes to the mind of the reader or the listener an appeal which is twofold. First, it conveys to his intellect a definite meaning through their sound. Consciously, he receives a meaning from the denotation of the words; subconsciously, he receives a suggestion from their connotation. How

33 Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, London: J. Cape, 1922, p. 131.

an utterance has the quality of style when these two appeals of language are so coordinated as to produce upon the reader or the listener an effect which is, not dual, but indissolubly singular.³⁴

In the novel there has been no continuous development of style, there are as yet no fully established and generally admitted principles to which one can appeal. Every novelist starts in to be a law unto himself. But the blessed human habit of imitating success, has led to the adoption of certain modes that are now somewhat standardized.

C. F. Horne sums up the modern viewpoint on style:

In particular application of this question to the novel, I emphasize two points. First, if the novel aims to reproduce real life, and to be simplification of life, its diction must be both simple and real. Upon the novel emphatically seems laid the command to avoid all pomposity and ornateness. Second, if the author intends to depict emotion, he must use the language of emotion, must find means to depict such deeps as flatly measured words can never plumb. In brief his work must have the heart of poetry without the mechanical form, the feeling without the "figures of speech."³⁵

The seventh and last essential to consider about the novel is that of emotional excitement on the part of the reader. From the beginning of time men, and thus readers, have consciously or unconsciously read themselves into the story, the novel. One of the encouragements given to reading is that in books one experiences vicariously the happiness and sorrow, the success and failure, of the characters. And that is the record of emotion. Mr. Stoddard states:

34 C. M. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 208.

35 C. F. Horne, op. cit., p. 241.

The novel has made its way in a large measure by an assertion of the superiority of that which is apparently a weaker or a lesser part of life, namely, emotion. For the novel does not stand in literary history as a record of achievement. It stands as a record of emotion. . . It asserts that the emotional period in life is the great period of life.³⁶

Some extreme realists have protested against this prominence of emotion or passion as false to the truth of life. Some have grouped passion as a single minor element of character. But in general its overshadowing importance and essentially extraneous impulse, upon the novel, as upon life, has been strongly felt. C. F. Horne sums up the case for emotion in the novel thus:

A later school of authors, even more relentless in their devotion to science, have insisted on explaining emotion away altogether, reducing it to an expression of character, a matter of nerve ganglia and digestion, a thing not elemental and common to all the race, but unique in each of us, impossible to some, having its origin in the peculiarities of the individual.

Whether this be true or no, need not specifically concern the present generation. If the idea that emotion can be positively predicted and mathematically measured by character, be ever established as a scientific fact, we shall all cease reading the novels that explained it, and study the truth and the demonstration more compantly in works on psychology. For the present there is every sign that the public will long continue to read itself into its stories, and will buy novels for the spell they exercise on the emotions, instead of seeking that spell in a direct assault upon the nervous ganglia.³⁷

These seven points represent each of them a distinct department with which a modern novel like Moby Dick must concern itself. That is give a man

36 Francis H. Stoddard, Evolution of the English Novel, New York: The MacMillan and Co., 1900, p. 200.

37 Ibid., p. 207.

a motive--or more specifically a desire to express a truth--strong enough to set him writing out his thoughts; give him words, a style wherewith to clothes the thought; character, people to figure out the thought to others; emotion, some inward excitement to stir the characters above mere eating and sleeping; plot, a connected series of actions springing from emotion; a background of common life or scenery against which all may stand; and lastly a point of view from which to tell his story; combine all these and we have a novel. And if the author's use of them has been artistic, we have a great novel.

It is essential to avoid separating the novel into divisions and parts while reading, for after all, the novel is intended for the reader. The main principle of narrative to bear in mind is that action alone, or character alone, is not its proper subject matter. The purpose of narrative is to represent events; and an event occurs only when both character and action, with contributory setting are assembled and commingled. Indeed, in the greatest and most significant events, it is impossible to decide whether the actor or the action has the upper hand. The best narratives are indistinguishable one from another, in their ultimate result: they differ only in their origin. In narrative at its best, character and action and even setting are one and inseparable.

Henry James gives this most human standard for a final test of the value of a novel:

The only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not. The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character--these clumsy separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own

convenience, but to have little reality or interest for the producer from whose point of view we are attempting to consider the art of fiction. Nothing will ever take the place of the good old fashion of "liking" a work of art or not liking it.³⁸

38 Henry James, op. cit., pp. 395-6.

CHAPTER TWO

LIFE AND WORKS: MOBY DICK IN PARTICULAR

For a clearer understanding of Melville's attitude of mind prior to the undertaking of his masterpiece it is necessary to say something about his life and his other works. The United States into which Herman Melville appeared on August 1, 1819, was still in the fullest sense of the word a provincial one, and the New York of his day still only equal in importance to Salem, Boston, Charleston, Baltimore. The accidents of being at the end of oceanic packet line and at the opening of a water-route into mid-America via the Erie Canal made it take the lead. Politically there was little unity of feeling among the separate states so much so that the New England States a few years previously had seriously considered breaking political union in 1812. It was only on the frontier that there was ferment; but even there little unity, besides a common flag and common constitution to which only a superficial respect was paid, was evident. The frontier town soon settled down to provincialism.

In provincial society the family was a prime reality. The landed gentry, particularly the Dutch in New York merely by sitting tight, rose to the top of the cream in the rapidly developing economic life. Into a tradition of two of these families Herman Melville came. On his father's side Major Melville, a Revolutionary officer who settled in Boston, was his conservative grandfather, conservative to the degree of wearing in his old age the cocked hat and knee breeches of his boyhood era, for which he became the

subject of Oliver Wendel Holmes' The Last Leaf. General Peter Gansevoort of New York, a Knickerbacker Dutch aristocrat, was his maternal grandfather. A giant of six feet four inches, he with one dash of the boot had broken down an oaken door to admit his negro slaves to put out a fire, and at one time annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads.¹ Both were of traditional European stock.

Melville's own immediate environment as a child was that of protected conventionality. His father, an importer of French goods, maintained a house of comfortable means where Herman was shut off from all the unfortunate happenings of a life of struggle that sometimes comes in families less well off financially. Both his father and mother had a name to uphold and as a result the boy was reared in the somewhat artificial background of a family that possessed the externals of correct society, but little more; for the creative in America was not a part of the New York intellectual scene.

In 1828 his father's position ballooned, but burst a few years later as a result of the financial crisis of 1826. Miscalculating his resources, Allan's business became so bad that, in spite of a move to Albany in 1830 to better his business connections with the Gansevoorts, he became bankrupt and died two years later when Herman Melville was thirteen years old. Allan's loving wife and eight children were left with only a name and charitable relatives to support them.

Herman all at once found himself in the midst of a hard-hearted world

1 F. L. Pattee, "Herman Melville," American Mercury, Vol. X (1927), p. 34.

in which all his youthful ambitions were disappointingly frustrated. Instead of preparing at college for a career as orator, or traveler as his father had been, or general as his grandfather, he found himself, fifteen, at work as clerk in the New York State Bank and then in his uncle's hat store. His only education would be that of self-education. The next summer he helped in his Uncle Thomas' hayfields and during the winter taught school to the children of the Washington Mountain district until they were needed in the fields in spring.

Returning to his mother who was living near Albany, he faced the stark reality that his was another mouth to feed at home and that he was not therefore too welcome. So at this time he followed his father's wandering restlessness and turned to the sea. He would ship to Europe, earn his own keep, and perhaps at the end of the voyage, have a little to spare. The family pride, breeding, patrician instincts would disappear and in exchange he could find out what men are in the rough and would gain a foothold on the actuality of life with its problem of good and evil that was to be his study for life.

"The Highlander" furnished a rare school for the impressionable lad of seventeen. The coarse crew, the misery, the depression, the dirty work were a far cry from the chaste and clean life of his family. Liverpool's sailor quarter was likewise a delusion to the gallant England painted in his father's descriptions of Europe and the sea. But the voyage tested the physical well-being of the youth. He found that he could turn into a bunk soaking wet, arise steaming, turn out to a frigid blast, and be none the worse for it. On his reunion with his family again, they found a lad who

had been buncoed out of his four months' wages by Captain Riga, and instead of staying home, he taught school for three years at Greenbush, now East Albany, and at Pittsfield.

Two pieces, Fragments from a Writing Desk, appeared in newspapers during the year. Written in 1839 they are exaggerated essays which indicate the future trend of the author's vocation and also show the self-development of the young teacher. "He was an omnivorous and lynx-eyed reader."² While Melville himself dates his growth from his twenty-fifth year, it was merely his self-consciousness that then came into existence. His growth intellectually began from his childhood when he had every opportunity to secure books and continued all during his life, in spite of later difficulty in securing them, as is evident from the wholesale use of references from the classics as well as from most of the contemporary literature of his day.

In 1840 Richard Henry Dana's Two Years Before the Mast appeared and while there is no evidence that Melville read it as soon as it came out, he nine years later referred to the author as "my friend Dana."³ This book may have influenced his return to sea. Also there seems little evidence that the dark words of opening in Moby Dick indicate anything else than a common urge of thousands of youths: "With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship."⁴ Whatever his motive,

2 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929, p. 39.

3 Ibid., p. 40.

4 Herman Melville, "Moby Dick," Complete Works of Herman Melville, London: Constable and Co., 1922, Vol. VII, p. 1.

the young Melville of twenty-one, hale, restless, adventure-craving, left the home from which he was already detached, in December, 1840, and sailed on a whaler January 3, 1841. His vessel was the "Acushnet" of Fairhaven, and Melville saw from it the whale's day of glory. Today only a few historic monuments, ship models and library treatises, remain from the once thriving industry. His own ship foundered ten years later in the very year in which he wrote Moby Dick.⁵

The voyage around South America to the South Seas was a long one that found a dissatisfied crew on a harsh, uncomfortable ship, under a brutal master. As the Marquesas approached, Melville planned to escape with his friend, Toby. They fled to the interior intending to leave on another ship. But plans miscarried and they found themselves in the valley of a carnivorous tribe, the Typees. Melville remained four months leading an idyllic life until a chance came for escape with a party of native traders, but only after he had killed an aged pursuing chieftain who had been kind to him. This period of comparative ease gave Melville an abundant storehouse for future reference and for examination of the comparative values of civilized and uncivilized life.

The "Julia", his next ship, was little better than the "Acushnet". At the first stop in port the crew rebelled and after a short imprisonment was released. Melville roved the shores of a Polynesian island for three months with Dr. Long Chest, a fellow mutiner, until he shipped on a third whaler, the "Vineyarder." While in Polynesia he had an opportunity to watch the

5 Lewis Mumford, op. cit., p. 44.

results of civilization on these natives whom in the end he judged worse off than the primitives of Typee. Another glimpse of his activities during this period is his work for four months in Honolulu, capital of the Sandwich Islands. Finally by the summer of 1843 he had shipped aboard the U.S. United States upon its homeward journey. The consolation of "Up anchor! We're homeward bound!" must have stirred his soul.

The navy of 1843 was a highly routinized affair with poor officers, at least those whom Melville met, and the brutal punishment of flogging. Twice Melville was sentenced to it, once being excused by kind intercession from the mate, for being absent from duty, and four refusing to shave his beard. On this voyage also occurred the crowning adventure of his travels when he was thrown into the ocean by a sudden lurch of the boat. Here he lived in a school of the utterly worldly: "The pent-up wickedness of five hundred men nearly overcame all my previous theories."⁶ He landed in Boston, October, 1844.

Melville settled down for a while in Lansingburgh; he had decided to write an account of his adventures. The lack of any other opening and the promise of some financial return were the external stimuli, but probably there was also an inner urge to satisfy. He found that the past few years had not been wasted. His roaming life was all to the good.

His first book was a narrative of his Four Months in the Marquessas among the Typees: its American title was Typee. It was also published in England. The book recounts Melville's adventures with a fineness of descrip-

6 Herman Melville, as quoted in F. L. Pattee, op. cit., p. 36.

tion and sincerity of note that met high praise from reviews and bitter criticism from Protestant missionaries whose activities were portrayed as the introduction of sin and vice to the natives. Also the charge of immorality of scene was advanced so a Revised Edition was produced upon the "aimiable" advice of his literary executor, Mr. Duyckink, to make it more palatable to the reading public.

Typee has three values: as description, realistic and sensuous, of the island and its inhabitants with their custome; as romance, in the style of Robinson Crusoe; as reformer, by a return to the savagery from which the race sprang--to primitive health of body and soul.⁷

The value of the success of Typee to the view of Melville's personality cannot be underestimated. He was an author. At last the long years as an outcast which had begun when he was thirteen, were ended in a genuine career. He was now treated as an equal by his elders and welcomed among literary men. His new fame and success must have made Melville look forward to literature as a source of permanent livelihood.

Typee was promptly followed with a sequel of Melville's adventures in the South Seas called Omoo. It is a description of Melville's life from his escape from the Typees to his signing up for another whaling voyage off the coast of Japan. Written in the same rapid vigorous style of Typee, it contains more humor, and shows an advance in character drawing. Besides Melville developed during the two years since he had left the sea. Typee and Omoo were but apprentice work. He began to read; the wealth of literary

7 F. L. Pattee, op. cit., p. 38.

allusion in his later volumes is remarkable. He would write, if he wrote at all, in a major key. He would write books of power.

In 1847 while Melville was casting about for a further subject after the completion of Typee and Omoo, his affection for Judge Shaw's daughter, whom he had met on his return from the South Seas, deepened and they were married in August, 1847. They honeymooned through New England and Canada, visited Melville's mother at Lansingburgh and settled with Melville's brother Allan and his sisters in New York. It is perhaps one of the sad events of his life that Elizabeth did not meet the intellectual level of her high-spirited husband. While she was a dutiful wife, contented, hard-working, she could never approach the soaring of the mind of her husband. The rover was chained to the conventional Bostonian dainty.

In Mardi, the book to which he now settled down, Melville tried at last to go inside himself to relate his own thoughts. He is no longer satisfied with the mere description of a voyage into the tropics, which is but a prelude to the principal part of the work. "Mardi is no island gem in the blue Pacific, but the whole world, and the author is undertaking to portray the beauty and the ugliness of the social order of the nineteenth century."⁸ Melville threw all his powers into the work. He has opening chapters of exciting adventure and again closing chapters of didactics and cynical criticism. It is not an insane jumble; it is a book of power. The search of Yillah is symbolical of the author's search for truth, for beauty, which however, ends in a note of despair. Vice, misery, hypocrisy, and incompetence--these he

⁸ S. A. Larrabee, "Melville Against the World," South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. XXXIV (1935), p. 412.

discovers, are the only known order in *Mardi*. Taji refuses, however, to accept the status quo as definitive. He resigns from it, declares himself against the world, and steers into the open sea. The book, poetically conceived with a remote allegorical quest running through it, came to an end in a savage parody of the whole economy of Western Civilization. In this book Melville strikes his note; his dissatisfaction with the status quo has a follow up all through the remainder of his life.

Lewis Mumford writers of this stage of melville's development:

The scene is now set: the struggle in which Melville is to participate is defined. It is a struggle between a plastic, conventional self, moulded in the fashion of his fellow citizens and fellow writers, and a hard, defiant, adamant self that springs out of his deepest consciousness of life, and is ready to assault not merely human conventions, but the high gods themselves. In a conflict between his career and his family duties, between pot-boiling and his maturest literary aims, this drama externalizes itself: it is present in the man, and it is present in his outward relationships. Let us make no mistake about it: Melville was not a writer of romances: it was a mere accident of history that turned the world's attention to him through the charm and tropical radiance of the South Sea adventures. Herman Melville was a thinker, in the sense that Dante was a thinker, who clothed his thoughts in poetic vision. That thought and vision was one of the most important things the century produced.⁹

In January, 1849, the last proof sheets were corrected and in February, Malcolm, Melville's first son was born. This added to his responsibility. The tremendous effort put into Mardi did not pay because the reading public was not prepared for such a book, and he was forced in rapid succession, to rush out Redburn and White Jacket. He now worked under every disadvantage: the distraction of a house hold with a young baby, the necessity of making

9 Lewis Mumford, op. cit., p. 107.

a living, and that promptly, the handicap of producing something on the level of his audience.

In Redburn Melville went back to his youth and traced his experiences up to his eighteenth year, capitalizing on his voyage to liverpool when he was seventeen. Largely autobiographical, for the first time appears the personal note of disappointment and bitterness. Primarily it is a story of a boy's trip to sea. Melville himself rated the book as a poor one:

When a poor devil writes with duns all around him, and looking over the back of his chair, and perching on his pen, and dancing in his inkstand--like the Devils about St. Anthony--what can you expect of that poor devil? What but a beggarly Redburn?¹⁰

But this was because it did not measure up to the standard he had set for himself. It accomplished what he set out to do and by 1850 sold twice as many copies as Mardi.

Before Redburn was printed, Melville wrote White Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War, an account of his experiences aboard the U.S. United States. It shows greater art and control over material than any of his previous works. The white jacket served as a bond of unity to the whole. Though written under pressure, Melville by now know his business. At thirty he had mastery. He was now prepared for a leap. But before he could take it, he in October, 1849, went over to England in person to arrange for the English publication of Redburn and White Jacket. After several months wait, he finally came to good terms with Mr. Bentley and at last, homesick for "Lizzie" and the baby, returned January 30, 1850.

¹⁰ Herman Melville, as quoted in a letter to Mr. Duyckinck in Lewis Mumford, op. cit., p. 110.

But it was time for Melville to start work again. In February, 1850, he owed his publisher, Harper's, more than seven hundred dollars in advances not covered by royalties. He did what he could to reduce his scale of living, left New York in the spring to go up to his Grand Uncle Thomas' estate, Broadhall, with his family. By October he had found a nearby farmstead, Arrowhead, for which Judge Shaw, Elizabeth's father, advanced the funds in a friendly sort of mortgage. A house that had been an inn during the eighteenth century, an apple orchard on the south side, broad hay fields to the north, and a pasture to the west which ended in a woodlot on the hill gave Melville every hope that, together with the narrow income he eked out of his books, he would be able to live decently with modest farming, a vegetable garden, a cow and a horse. For a man in prime health there was nothing injudicious in this arrangement. Elizabeth, however, proved incapable of managing a household, or of cooking even the simplest meal, so soon Mrs. Maria Melville and his sisters came to live with them to teach the rudiments of the household arts to Elizabeth. But that arrangement also added so many more mouths to an already strained purse.

In 1850 Melville was at the top of his energies: the impetus from Typee and Omoo had not been lost; the reception in England had probably added to his confidence; when he looked around him, the American scene reinforced his courage and his convictions, and gave him new strength.¹¹

In the spring of 1850 The Scarlet Letter appeared and Melville presently awoke to find that Hawthorne, whose books he had hitherto kept away from,

11 Lewis Mumford, "The Writing of Moby Dick," American Mercury, Vol. XV (1928), p. 483.

despite the praise of them he had heard, was a kindred spirit. Here, at last, was one man capable of understanding every part of him. When, this summer, he came upon Mosses from an Old Manse, he realized he had lost much by his aloofness from the Salem magician. He hastened to repair his neglect, for he soon gave the Literary World one of the best appreciations of Hawthorne, and incidentally one of the keenest expositions of the situation of the creative writer in American arts written up to that time.

On August 5, 1850, Hawthorne noted in his American Notebooks that he drove from Lenox, near which he lived in a penurious red farmhouse, to Stockbridge, where he found at the house of Fields, the Boston publisher, Dr. Holmes, Mr. Duyckinok of New York, Mr. Cornelius Mathews and Herman Melville.¹² They ascended the Monument Mountain and the party was caught in a shower: according to tradition, it was during that summer storm, under a shoulder of a rock where they had taken refuge, that these two stormy souls first overcame their reticence and plowed through conversation to a deeper intimacy.

The New Yorkers called on Hawthorne in the forenoon two days later and Hawthorne treated them to a couple of bottles of Mr. Masefield's champagne; and from that time on Melville was a familiar sight in the household. The family called him Mr. Omoo; young Julian said that he loved Mr. Melville as well as papa and mama and Una. Even Sophia Hawthorne was fascinated by him. Her tribute is the more remarkable when one considers her complete preoccupation with her husband:

I am not quite sure, that I do not think him a very great man. . . . A man with a true, warm heart, and a soul and an intellect - with life to his fingertips; earnest, sincere,

and reverent; very tender and modest. He has very keen perceptive power; but what astonishes me is that his eyes are not large and deep. He seems to me to see everything accurately; and how he does so with his small eyes I cannot tell. They are not keen eyes, either, but quite undistinguished any way. His nose is straight and handsome, his mouth expressive of sensibility and emotion. He is tall and erect, with an air free, brave and manly. When conversing, he is full of gesture and force, and loses himself in his subject.¹³

But Melville did not find in Hawthorne a kindred spirit. The exaggerated reserve enkindled in him by his mother did not allow Hawthorne to raise himself to Melville's flights. When they at last became friends, he contrived a hundred different ways of assaulting Hawthorne's reserve; he staggered up mountains, uncovered mounds of debris, jumped gaily off into innumerable abysses, all to excite Hawthorne to some equivalent disclosure. He did not know at the outset of his enthusiasm that nothing would ever shake that glacial reserve.

Melville was beginning at this time to feel the spiritual struggle that was to engulf him in Moby Dick. With Hawthorne as a fellow traveler, Melville thought he could be content and could be happy. "I shall leave the world, I feel, with more satisfaction for having come to know you. Knowing you persuades me more than the Bible of our immortality."¹⁴

His letters to Hawthorne at this time give a surer insight into Melville's moods and aims than any other pages he ever wrote. This passage from one of them illustrates his high spirits when he started Moby Dick:

¹³ Sophia Hawthorne, as quoted in Lewis Mumford, "The Writing of Moby Dick," op. cit., p. 485.

¹⁴ Herman Melville as quoted in Ibid., p. 486.

If ever, my dear Hawthorne, in the eternal times that are to come, you and I shall sit down in paradise, in some little shady corner by ourselves; and if we shall by any means be able to smuggle in a basket of champagne there (I won't believe in a Temperance Heaven), and if we shall then cross our celestial legs in the celestial grass that is forever tropical, and strike our glasses and our heads together till both musically ring in concert, - than, O my dear fellow mortal, how shall we pleasantly discourse of the things manifold which now so distress us, - when all the earth shall be but a reminiscence, yea, its final dissolution an antiquity.¹⁵

However, their friendship never did develop into any real intimacy and perhaps their difference of age of half a generation is the explanation of it. Hawthorne always remained aloof and gradually their friendship dissolved. There seems to be little truth to Mumford's explanation that Hawthorne's Ethan Brand was a castigation of Melville.¹⁶ Perhaps the most easily understood explanation of their parting is that Melville, having gone to the well did not choose to return when he found it dry and empty though he had primed it.

Sometime in 1850 towards the close of summer he must have begun to write Moby Dick, for the book, which is a long one, was finished in the summer of 1851. Into the actual writing went a considerable amount of preparation, and one does not know how long before the theme of the book had begun root itself in Melville's mind. The work shows that he had reached out for every book on whaling that had been written, and, in addition, he had made note of every quotation and allusion to the whale he had met in his wide

15 Herman Melville, as quoted in Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife: A Biography, by Julian Hawthorne, London: Chatto and Windus, 1885, Vol. I, pp. 402-3.

16 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, op. cit., pp. 145-7.

miscellaneous reading. The actual writing took place under adverse conditions. He wrote constantly from nine in the morning to three and often four in the afternoon, at the same time keeping up his chores about the house. The book was started with exuberance as evidenced by his note to Hawthorne: "Can you send me about fifty fast-writing youths. . . If you can I wish you could, because since I have been here I have planned about that number of future works and can't find enough time to think about them separately."¹⁷ And he writes later:

How then with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously, my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand. Friends! hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with the outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty volume you must choose a mighty theme.¹⁸

But so many hours of writing and reading intensified by the spiritual struggle going on within him, left him weak by the end of the winter. His eyes began to fail. He went down to New York to see the first part of the book through the press, but the oppressive, humid days so oppressed him, and the delays of the printers so disgusted him, that he went back to the country

17 Herman Melville, as quoted in Some Personal Letters of Herman Melville and a Bibliography, edited by Meade Minnegerode, New York: E. B. Hacket, The Brick Row Shop, 1922, p. 71.

18 Herman Melville, as quoted in Lewis Mumford, "The Writing of Moby Dick," op. cit., p. 488.

where he revived, but later returned to finish the last chapter. The book that was begun in exuberation and health in the keen air of October in the Berkshires was finished in the humid days of a dirty unkempt city. The book itself was published toward the end of 1851, by Bentley, in England, under the title, The Whale, and a little later in the same year by Harper's in New York under its commonest title, Moby Dick.

In Moby Dick Melville was supremely an artist, with an eye constantly upon the dramatic value of his story. The main outlines came from a whale of legendary knowledge among whalers, Mocha Dick, a huge white whale that appeared for years in the High Seas, as well as from a story in Melville's repertoire by J. N. Reynolds, entitled Mocha Dick. However, in Melville's hands the story underwent a great alchemy:

* He would not let his Moby Dick be mortal, but carried him unscathed through his adventures and at the end sent him off, victorious, shouldering the troubled waves with his ancient head. Nor would he allow the war against Moby Dick to be the plain war of the hunter and the hunted, but gave his hunter the excuse to trace the whale until that whale had chased him and bitten off his leg. Nor would Melville allow the story to be conducted on the small plane of mere adventure, but lifted it up into the regions of allegory and symbolism, adding the fury of hot passion, drenching it with poetry and dark mystery, lighting it with irony and satire and comic vividness and vast laughter. It was his genius which made the story of Moby Dick important.¹⁹

The book was done, but instead of taking time for recuperation, Melville plunged immediately into his next, Pierre, or the Ambiguities. It was an unwise decision, but one necessitated by his ever-present necessity to keep

19 C. C. Van Doren, "Mocha Dick," Roving Critic, New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1923, p. 99.

his public and to add to his income. As a result the weakness of the author appears because of his haste. The whole is disappointing from the author of Moby Dick. The story is that of a young writer who, to hide his father's adultery, "marries" his half-sister, takes in his sweetheart, and leads an unhappy life which ends in death, or suicide, for each one. The plot is forced, the style uneven, the facts untrue to life. The sub-title, The Ambiguities, tells what he tried to show. The world as he was aware of it was a sham: cannibals of the South Seas are better than the New York Slummers; the civilization that professes Christianity, disregards its precepts; the wicked are often better than the self-righteous. While the message was pertinent, his handling of it was mediocre and it fell short of being a great book. And to a certain extent the disillusioned mood of *Pierre* became that of Herman Melville.

Such a book, of course, did not sell. Moby Dick had been variously received, and it was definitely not a best-seller. Melville, judging from the tone of *Pierre*, was dissatisfied. His public did not want his message, but to do otherwise became loathful to him. However, he must keep up his income. He wrote to Hawthorne:

Dollars damn me, and the malicious devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. My dear Sir, a presentiment is upon me - I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, it will not pay. Yet, altogether write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash; and all my books are botches.²⁰

20 Herman Melville, as quoted in Lewis Mumford, op. cit., pp. 155-6.

Contemporary evidence on the next decade of Melville's life is incomplete. That he was disappointed with the failure of his books financially is true, but he hardly turned into an introvert who was perhaps even a bit insane. The steady output of stories, novels, poems, which marked the next forty years of Melville's life belie this fact. The strain of two long books in two years caught up with him. Severe rheumatism and sciatica weakened him.

Besides, in 1852 the Harper's fire destroyed all the remaining copies of his books, and he was not popular enough to republish. He was ruined. Seven years and seven novels, seven years of caustic criticism seemed difficult to bear by a disillusioned writer. A few short stories were his sole output in 1852. To the friends who suggested giving up writing and going into business, his answer was that he preferred not to.

In 1854 appeared the Encantadas, a series of sketches, and finally in July he began to publish the story of Israel Potter, a full length novel. The attempt at a long work indicates a return to health. The novel ranks far below his best work. However, it contains one of the best accounts of a sea-fight in history, far surpassing Cooper's picture of John Paul Jones in The Pilot, and is one of the few works of American fiction that deals with patriotic episodes in a generous straightforward way.²¹

In 1856 Melville gathered some of the short stories he had written during the previous three years and published them as The Piazza Tales, the piazza being the porch of his home at Arrowhead where they were written. One of the stories, Benito Cereno, is excellently done. In it Melville is back

21 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, op. cit., p. 241.

in full swing, but his next work, The Confidence Man, His Masquerade, published in 1856, is by all odds the most difficult of his books. In it Melville returns to the vein of satire seen in Mardi. One reading it for isolated story value will be disappointed, but if he puts it beside Gulliver's Travels, he finds its whole aspect changed.

With the Confidence Man Melville closed his book. He had by 1856 reached the depth of his work, the almost complete indifference of the contemporary public made him turn inward, and health failing again after too close application to work, Judge Shaw came to his aid, and he went abroad visiting Constantinople and the Holy Land. He visited Hawthorne, now American consul in Liverpool, but the only deep friendship of his life did not reblossom. The trip helped him physically, but mentally he did not change; however, he had almost decided to drop his profession as a writer.

Returning in the middle of 1857, he turned to the lecture platform. However, he had little public success even when he avoided the metaphysical speculations which have sometimes been held responsible for his literary downfall. In part it may be attributed to his inability to display upon the platform his narrative vividness, but in large part it may also be attributed to the fact that he had so completely exhausted his personal experiences that his attempts to please the public led him into commonplace generalities and verbal repetitions of himself.²² Though he kept strictly to a word painting of the South Seas, drawing upon his reading of historical accounts and upon

22 M. R. Davis, "Melville's Midwestern Lecture Tour, 1859," Philological Quarterly, Vol. xx (1941), pp. 56-7.

the material of his published book, he did not please his audience. Nor did he help himself financially for he averaged only about fifty dollars per lecture, a sum which Thoreau was receiving for a simple reading at the time.

In 1858 he began his first essays in verse, not for profit, but for the pleasure of writing. By 1860 there were enough verses to fill a volume, which were published by Mr. Duyckink while Melville went off with his brother Thomas, who was now captain of his own clipper, on a cruise around the world. However, by the time they arrived in California, he disembarked and returned home. The title to Arrowhead that came with the death of Judge Shaw did not relieve the financial strain and Melville, after being turned down for a consular post in spite of a personal interview with Lincoln, decided in 1861 to move to New York again. But on the way his carriage overturned, and he was laid up for weeks in a nearby home.

At this time the Civil War, arriving after the pent-up hatred of the past decades, had a profound effect upon him. His Battle Pieces show that although he saw the North victor in the war, he doubted its conquest of the peace. As poetry the pieces have little value.

In 1866 Melville, at forty-seven, gave up all attempt at earning a living as a writer. He had tried for twenty years, fifteen of them in continuous struggle, to make a go of it, but he had failed. Through the good offices of a friend he accepted a position as inspector in the New York Custom House. At last he had stability, and had time for the prosecution of a long work, but all that appeared during the next ten years was a long, tiresome poem, Clarel, published in 1876, of 571 pages and about 20,000 lines based upon his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Two other volumes, privately

printed, John Marr and Other Sailors, 1888, and Timoleon, 1891, complete the record of his published work. At the very end of his life he wrote Billy Budd, a story of three sailors in the British Navy.

Nor were the final days of Melville's life those of extreme misery and happiness. As a result of legacies left to him and to Elizabeth, he died in comparative wealth. His estate at his death in 1891 was valued at \$13,261.31 while that of his wife was \$170,369.62, quite an opposite picture of the tradition of poverty after Elizabeth Melville's death. His final debt was paid off to Harper's in 1864 when he gave them \$200.²³

This ease and leisure agreed with him. Though he was a failure, at least as far as he could judge from the public reaction, in his vocation as a writer, he was at least submissive to his fate. Mr. Wegelin, a contemporary, gives this picture of him in his later days:

Melville, as I recall him, was slightly below the average in stature, and walked with a rapid stride and almost a sprightly gait. . . I particularly recall his gentleness of manner and his pleasant smile. I never found him to be the misanthrope that many authorities accuse him of having been; it is difficult for me to believe that he was a disappointed man - if he was he did not permit his disappointment to come out into the open.

Certainly Melville in 1890 had every right to feel embittered so far as his fame as an author was concerned, but I doubt if he was. He always appeared to me to have been a man who preferred being alive and neglected, to being dead and famous.²⁴

24 O. Wegelin, "Herman Melville, As I Recall Him, " Colophon, No. 1 (1935), pp. 22-3.

CHAPTER THREE

MOBY DICK: MEANING

In outlining the essentials of a novel the requirement was laid down that the "purpose" of the author in writing the book is very important if it is to be worthwhile. In other words: "What did the author say?" In every piece of art, if it is to be valuable as art, a message is conveyed. Otherwise the work, painting, novel, poem, will like a whirlpool, spin itself out and leave nothing on the surface but a few bubbles of foam. On the other hand, technique and artistry, a sort of craftsmen's skill, are important, and enhance the enjoyment of an art enormously; but of themselves they are insufficient. A great work of art must have content as well as form. It is the purpose of this chapter to inquire into Moby Dick to see whether Melville has anything worthwhile to say, and to do that one must inquire into the meaning of the novel.

It is, however, imperative to bring to light at the moment the mind of Melville at the time of his work on Moby Dick. Attributing to the author a direct coincidence of thought and act with his characters is perhaps open to error, but, as noted in the chapter on Melville's life, he makes the statement in the words of Pierre: "I write precisely as I please."¹ But the way he pleased was not the pleasure, often, of his reading public. All through his writing career, he aimed at the expression of his own psycholog-

1 Herman Melville, Pierre, The Works of Herman Melville, London: Constable and Co., 1923, Vol. IX, p. 397.

ical reactions to life. In Typee and Omoo he exhibited nearly as much realism and satire as "romance" of the South Seas; Redburn and White Jacket were to interest readers as social documents rather than as tales of adventure; Mardi sacrificed character and action to social satire; Clarel attempted to discover a faith that would survive the wasteland of modern science and materialism; Pierre plunged into the realms of psychology; and Moby Dick aimed at the presentation of cosmic speculation into the problem of evil.

His whole life was one of skepticism and mental conflict. His last book, Billy Budd, unpublished at his death, shows that the same struggle was going on. It was a struggle that melted the conventions of his upbringing into a rebellious positivism. His great book, Moby Dick, shows that natural man, surrounded by the conventionalities of all his instincts, cruises madly to revenge himself on the malignity of the universe. To show his rationalization of the hidden world of emotions that the science of his day had not yet begun to consider, he set down his discoveries in symbolic narrative, defying a public that wanted stories, not prophecies.²

The aim of each book, writes F. L. Pattee, was a portrayal of himself:

He could center upon nothing objective. He, like Byron, could write only of himself. Unless he had personally felt, or actually experienced, his imagination took no fire. All that he ever wrote was autobiographic, ego-centric, and always it is an ego in fierce rebellion.³

Hawthorne, who perhaps had a better opportunity than any other man to judge his character and thought, as revealed in their repeated conversations,

2 H. S. Canby, "Hawthorne and Melville," Classic Americans, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931, p. 234.

3 F. L. Pattee, "Herman Melville," American Mercury, Vol. X (1927), pp. 38-39.

wrote in his journal in 1856 after the two had a long talk:

He can neither believe, nor be uncomfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.⁴

Melville's long and epic life was dedicated to grappling with the mystery of evil; whose reason he explored, whose sanction he impugned; and whose enmity to the human race he opposed with an uncompromising and aggressive hostility, which was to the exclusion of all else the theme of his life and literary work.⁵ He wanted to believe that somewhere was hidden a philosopher's stone potent enough to compel the world to bow to the soul. *Mardi* is his first record of his search for some answer to the problem of evil that hounded him all his days. This uneasiness of spirit was later dramatized in Moby Dick and again in Pierre and Clarel.

Indicative of Melville's own attitude toward his mental turmoil is this letter to Hawthorne written while he was in the midst of his work on Moby Dick:

I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, developed, grew to greenness, and then fell to mold. So I. Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But now I feel that I am

4 Herman Melville, as quoted in Junian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife: A Biography, London: Chatto and Windus, 1885, Vol. II, p. 135.

5 L. Morris, "Melville: Promethean," Open Court, Vol. VI (1931), p. 514.

come to the inmost leaf of the bulk, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mold.⁶

Besides a knowledge of Melville's mental position when he wrote Moby Dick, it is also imperative to have a knowledge of the story he wrote. It is the purpose of the next few pages to review the events of the book that Melville records in the long, slow-moving narrative that recounts the tragedy of Captain Ahab and the White Whale told from the viewpoint of Ishmael, the sole survivor of the catastrophe in which the mighty whale swims off victoriously after destroying the "Pequod."

The teller of the story is Ishmael, a wanderer without human tie, an outcast among men, who, in chill November sets out for New Bedford. That evening he takes refuge in an inn where he meets and makes friends with Queequeg, a cannibal, who, with his harpoon, his idol, his filed teeth, the human head he carries around for sale, is an entry of the horror of the universe for Ishmael. A further cast of the trend of the narrative comes with Father Mapple's magnificent sermon which the minister delivers after ascending to the pulpit by a rope ladder, hand over hand, and drawing the ladder up after him to signify his spiritual withdrawal from all outward ties and connections where he delivers the sermon on Jonah, another outcast of the world who refused a truth of the universe.

Sharing confidences with Queequeg, Ishmael's friendship is one of the few touches of affection of the whole story. Two outcast strays make a contract. On the boat that takes them to Nantucket, Queequeg daringly rescues a

6 C. C. Van Doren, "Lucifer from Mantucket," American Criticism, W. A. Drake, ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926, p. 320.

bumpkin whom he had punished a few hours before for mimicking him. But, instead of building up this event as heroic, from this point on there is little development of their friendship or their personalities. Melville's story is to center around the whale. There is no time for a hero. The central figure is the whale, which as we shall see, stood for the universe.

Captain Ahab, who commands the "Pequod," the ship on which Ishmael and Queequeg sign to sail, is embellished with mystery before the very anchor is lifted. In the dawn when Ishmael goes aboard, he sees four or five figures running toward the ship who disappear before he gets on deck, and a crazy seaman heightens the mystery by muttering dreadful hints about Ahab and the voyage. With a last blessing from the owners, the ship sets out Christmas day. Ahab remains shut up in his cabin; and while the crew gives three heavy-hearted cheers, the ship "blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic."⁷ Left behind are all the comforts of land; wind and sea and whale now enter the story. The author widens his picture to include all the figures of the motley crew: Bulkington, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, Tashtego, Daggoo, Ahab.

When the whale enters, the narrative for the first time pauses, and the reader discovers that the crew and story are secondary. The whale occupies one's attention while Melville classifies the whale into its place in natural history, magnifies its bulk, habits, shape, characteristics, and gives its place in politics, economics, history, and human adventure. He approaches the whale as a scientist and as a fisherman. When Melville finishes, the

7 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, The Works of Herman Melville, London: Constable and Co., 1922, Vol. VII, p. 131.

reader has as complete a knowledge of the whale as he can hope for, but strangely, these passages do not interrupt the flow of the narrative. The course of the story rolls along slowly, but momentously, as do the long swells and the wide expanses of the ocean itself, to give a sense of immensity to the story.

When Ahab finally appears, a foreboding shiver runs over Ishmael.

"Reality outran apprehension. . . He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness."⁸ One of Ahab's legs has been snapped off and he stands on a stump made of whale ivory with sorrow written on his face and the regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe. In his presence his mates shrivel before his titanic pride. There was madness in that pride, the madness of a tormented soul.

The goad that causes Ahab's mad fury is the memory of his encounter with that white whale, Moby Dick, who had snapped off his leg and left him humiliated, crippled, for days lying in a hammock brooding over his torn body and nourishing the intense fury that made him mad.

Every since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him not only all his bodily woes but all his spiritual and intellectual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all the malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. . . All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonism of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He

⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

piled up on the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.⁹

Ahab assembles the crew and after stirring it up to a frenzy, he nails a gold piece to the mast and announces: "Whoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw. . .shall have this gold ounce."¹⁰ He announces the purpose of the voyage: "This is what we shipped for men! to chase the white whale on both sides of the land, and over all sides of the earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out!"¹¹ Starbuck alone remonstrates. And Ahab:

All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks. But in each event--and in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is what I chiefly hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to be of blasphemy, man: I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealously presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.¹²

9 Ibid., pp. 229-30.

10 Ibid., p. 201.

11 Ibid., p. 203.

12 Ibid., p. 204.

The crew pledges; they burst into revelry; Ishmael's shouts go up with the rest. A wild mystical feeling is in him, and Ahab's feud seems his own.

Now comes Moby Dick. There is no more prodigious whale. All whales are dangerous to hunt, but Moby Dick multiplies the vicissitudes of the chase: he turns on his pursuers and again and again escapes. A wrinkled forehead, a high white hump, and a streaked and marbled body make him more dangerous than all other sperm whales, the most dangerous of all whales. Rumors raise his size to enormous dimensions; but the very whiteness of the whale adds something more. White has a hundred mythological allusions. The whiteness of the white shark, of the white squall in southern seas, the terror of white breakers when a ship is skirting a coast--all these gain a bleak terror from their cold hue. White is the terrible elemental truth. "Of all these things, the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"¹³

Day and night Ahab's mind broods on Moby Dick. He pours over his charts to plot the whale's course from one feeding ground to another. But meanwhile the crew encounters whales, pursues them, captures some; but through it all the terror and anguish of the constant danger increases. Pip, the negro cabin boy, pops out of a boat to be left behind; he is rescued, but has gone mad. Tashtego falls into a dead whale's head. Constant danger endures. But what of it?

All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only in the swift subtle turns of death that mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in a whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror than

13 Ibid., p. 244.

though seated before your evening fire with a poker and not a harpoon by your side.¹⁴

Gradually too, the complete whale emerges from the hunt, the capture, the dismantling. The symbol of the whale is built up.

The ship sails on. She meets other ships. Ahab's relentless search continues: "Hast seen the White Whale?" It meets a shoal in the Sundra Straits, but only one is captured. The chase grows hotter. The "Pequod" meets the "Samuel Enderly" of London which has met Moby Dick. Ahab is so excited that he precipitously shatters his ivory leg springing back to his ship. The carpenter fashions a new one, but the indignity fires the flame of Ahab's pride: "Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this bulkhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-debtedness which will not do away with the ledgers. I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's books."¹⁵

Ahab has a new harpoon fashioned and prepares his crew, the mysterious group whom Ishmael saw board the ship back in Nantucket, all Orientals, led by a Parsee, Fedallah. But every move causes some new obstacle. Ahab's words become frenzied. The "Bachelor," homeward bound, pauses for a friendly parley, but Ahab leaves it behind with a curse. In his madness he throws aside all aid of human science: the quadrant goes overboard. In the last extremity of pursuit, the quadrant is tossed aside as a useless toy. Now the ship must ride out a typhoon; in the storm three corposants, tapers of white flame, appear on the three lightning-rods of the masts. But Ahab charges on:

14 Ibid., p. 357.

15 Ibid., p. 239-40.

instead of bowing to the blind forces around him, the storm, the sea, the lightning, the whale, his resolution is fortified. Note his words as he addressed the lofty tri-pointed flames:

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that they right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence will thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless power; but to the last gasp of me earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral master in me. . . O thou clear spirit of the fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee.¹⁶

But everything conspires against him: the compass needle goes wrong; the log and line snap off when they are heaved; a man is lost overboard, and the life-buoy tossed to him springs a leak and goes down with him. The "Rachel," which has lost a crew with the captain's son aboard, pleads for his help, but Ahab refuses the call of humanity. One sole call touches him: the devotion of the idiot black Pip; he is almost unmanned by it, but the chase goes on. The memory of his wife and child, the recollection of his long, weary years, his forty years of waste and folly since as a boy-harpooner of eighteen he struck his first whale, his desolation in a lonely command, all these rise before him, but his purpose is fixed.

At last after a clear day, Ahab detects a whale in the wind and at next daybreak, Ahab himself raises the hump-like snow-head--Moby Dick. In the smooth ocean, with scarcely a ripple through the water, Moby Dick seems a child at play. Becoming aware of the chase, he sounds--only to return with

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 281-82.

open jaws beneath the bottom of Ahab's boat, and, after playing with it as a cat with a mouse, he bites it in twain. The "Pequod" sails on the whale and drives him off. Ahab and his crew are rescued, with Ahab wailing from some far inland part of his being as desolate as sounds from out ravines.

The second day comes, and the boats lower again. Moby Dick plunges immediately towards the boats with open jaws and lashing tail, but the harpoons thrust into him become entangled and the lines are shortened: again the whale dives and rises, this time throwing Ahab's boat topsy-turvy into the air. Ahab's ivory leg is snapped off; and again he is rescued. At noon the next day Ahab, doubling on his tracks, keeping watch himself, sees the whale coming toward him in the distance. The calm beauty of the day wakes some old humanity in him, but he is fixed in his purpose.

'Some men die at ebb-tide; some at low water; some at the full of the flood; - I feel like a billow that's all one crested comb. I am old; - shake hands with me man,' says Ahab to his first mate.¹⁷

Their hands met; their eyes fastened; but Starbuck's tears cannot restrain Ahab's order to lower away in pursuit. The whale sounds and comes up in the midst of the boats to dash in the bows of the mate's boat. The whale allows Ahab to catch up with him; he darts his iron and curse into his flanks; the whale turns on the "Pequod" herself and splinters its flanks. Ahab hurls another iron; the line fouls and while he stoops to unsnarl it, he is caught round the neck and is drowned. The ship settles and the boats with their crews are pulled down in the suction. And with the final spar Ahab's flag snares a sky-hawk and goes down into the water.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 358.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.¹⁸

Ishmael alone remained to tell the tale. Buoyed up by Queequeg's sealed coffin, he floated for a day and a half until he was picked up by the "Rachael" seeking her missing children, but finding only another orphan.

An attempt at a prosaic recounting of the story like this is ineffectual. Dismembered passages taken piecemeal from the book can never give a just idea of the book taken from the viewpoint of story alone. To appreciate the vast reaches of it, the reader must follow the long undulating waves of the book itself, catching the resounding madness and fury of Ahab and the whale against which he futilely raises his mad harpoon. The impact of the book comes only after the rising crescendo of over five hundred pages and one hundred thirty-four chapters have run their course in a slowly rising crescendo that breaks with a crash leaving only the echo of an ear-splitting chord behind it.

Lewis Mumford wrote in 1929:

For three-quarters of a century Moby Dick has suffered at the hands of the superficial critic; it has been condemned because to one man it seemed confused, to another it was not a novel, to a third the characters were not "real," and to a fourth it was merely a weird, mystical, impossible tale of dubious veracity, an example of bedlam literature, while to a fifth, it was just a straight-forward account of the whaling industry, marred by a crazy captain and an adventitious plot. The final answer to all these criticisms lies, of course, in the book itself.¹⁹

It was into this book that Melville, fairly successful, healthy, and

18 Ibid., p. 367.

19 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929, p. 117.

full of the vigor of life, poured himself in the October of 1849 when he started writing Moby Dick. All his energies, his spirit, his genius, his strength, went into the pursuit of his great theme. He forgot himself and identified himself with Ahab and his crew and the whale. Like Ishmael his cry went up with the rest of the crew when Ahab announced the purpose of the hunt. His personality was submerged in the strife which he animated. His own loneliness and loftiness of spirit, his communings, his griefs, his consolations are here subtly present. By his unlabored, instinctive infusion he passed into his creation and found himself there, not so much in words as in spirit.²⁰

On June 29, 1851, Melville sent this note about Moby Dick in a letter to Hawthorne. It is a piquant revelation of his mind toward the end of his work on the book. Whether Melville speaks literally or metaphorically is open to question, but it does reveal the "hell-fire" in which his book was "boiled!"

Shall I send you a fin of the "whale" by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked, though the hell-fire in which the whole book is boiled might not unreasonably have cooked it ere this. This is the book's motto (the secret one): Ego te baptiso te in nomine - make out the rest for yourself.²¹

A careful reading of Moby Dick with a surrender to the slow swell of the story and to the enlarging figures of the whale and the sea and Ahab, causes the realization that the book is not a hodge-podge at all, but a unity, to burst upon the reader. It is a voyage, and what is a voyage but a vast miscellany? And again you awake with a start: it bursts upon you that this is

20 John Freman, Herman Melville, New York: The MacMillan Co., 1925, pp.117-8.

21 Herman Melville, as quoted in Herman Melville, by R. M. Weaver, New York: George H. Doran Co., 1921, pp. 319-20.

more than a mere voyage: it is an infernal Pilgrim's Progress; it is a study of the fundamentals of human life; it is a clinic; it is a mad attempt to thrust aside the veil that hides the supreme mystery of man; it is a man "invictus" hurled at "whatever gods there be."²²

But the question that now presents itself is: did Melville intend his book to be read as an allegory or as a story? While it certainly is possible for an author to write greater than he knows, it is an interesting point in a survey of this kind to see what the intention of Melville was. A lead quotation on this point is that from Moby Dick:

So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory.²³

Melville here apparently suggests an ironical fear, as Mr. Weaver²⁴ and Mr. Meyers²⁵ point out, that the ignorant may mistake his book as a mere allegory. Apparently he expects that the book will be dismissed, as Mardi was already, and thus his acceptance by the public will be jeopardized again. When one recalls the failure of Mardi and his subsequent work on Redburn and White Jacket, two books written according to the taste of his contemporaries, one can appreciate his statement. Melville, without a doubt, wanted this pro-

22 F. L. Pattee, op. cit., p. 40.

23 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 257.

24 R. M. Weaver, "Herman Melville," Bookman, Vol. CIV (1921), p. 324.

25 H. A. Meyers, "Captain Ahab's Discovery: The Tragic Meaning of Moby Dick," New England Quarterly, Vol. XV (1942), p. 18.

duct of his imagination to succeed, and a harsh reception by reviewers would and did grieve him keenly. However, it would seem that these men are reading the lines apart from the context. Melville refers, not to his book, but to his white whale, *Moby Dick*. His fear is that, as he says above, "landsmen" . . . might scoff at *Moby Dick* as a mere fragment of the author's imagination because they are unaware of the facts "of the fisher, historical and otherwise." It was tremendously important to Melville that the whale be accepted, not as a "hideous and intolerable allegory," but as a "plain fact" because his struggle against Ahab was to be the very core of the book. Ahab was to struggle not against a myth, but a real, terrifying force. While it is true, as shall be shown, Melville made his whale the sum of the evil of the world incarnate, he wanted his reader to visualize the white whale as an actuality.

That Melville intended his story to represent the allegory of the conflict of madness against the forces of evil is evident from his own letters, apart from the statements made in the story itself. But how far he intended *Moby Dick* to be a symbol cannot now be discovered. Unfortunately, a letter of Hawthorne's, written to Melville after *Moby Dick* appeared dedicated to him, has been lost. Judging from Melville's reply, Hawthorne praised the book, and its symbolism in particular. Melville wrote to him, thanking him for his letter of praise: "Why, ever since Adam, who has got the meaning of this allegory - the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended."²⁶ His book is an allegory, by his own avowal, of the world. But, as usual, he fears it will be "ill comprehended."

26 Herman Melville, as quoted in Herman Melville, *Mariner and Mystic*, by R. M. Weaver, op. cit., p. 327.

But what and how much of it is to be taken allegorically? He told

Hawthorne's wife:

I had some idea while writing it that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, and also that parts of it were - but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories were first revealed to me after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-and parcel allegoricalness of the whole.²⁷

Melville himself, then, was never too clear in any expressed explanation of the meaning of Moby Dick. That the book was to represent externally his internal struggle is plain. It was his deliberate intention to do so. A recollection of his mental development at the time of Moby Dick's writing brings this point out more clearly; and, as mentioned before, he wrote better than he knew. It is a recognized fact that frequently works of literature have read into them meanings that the author never suspected. Similiarly, Melville here intended the book to represent his mental state, the struggle of the forces of evil in the universe against man, and he left that struggle work itself out in the violent clash between Ahab and the whale; and, so far as extant records go, he never clarified the message himself. The reader and critic, therefore, lacking explanations by the author, is left with the only alternative, an attempt at explanation from internal evidence in the book itself.

In this examination the critic must be careful to distinguish the element of story and the element of allegory. To Melville Moby Dick certainly did represent a story - a tremendous conflict between a whale as protagonist

27 Herman Melville, as quoted in "Lucifer from Nantucket," American Criticism, op. cit., p. 319.

and a man as antagonist; and the unfolding of that plot has a great interest from the viewpoint of adventitious plot, discussion of which must be delayed at this point until it is taken up in its proper place in the next chapter where Moby Dick is judged on the score of technique. The discussion in order is that of allegory. Just what did Melville, intentionally or unintentionally, mean to say in Moby Dick?

Many and varied are the keys suggested for the allegory. Interpreters have found in Ahab, for instance, the following clues for the solution of the riddle: first, the allegory of the proud soul riding to its doom; second, the allegory of the speculative soul following the problem of evil to its fatal lair; third, the allegory of the violated soul going to the end of the earth for justice; and fourth, the allegory of the infatuated soul skirting continents and crossing oceans for the sake of union with an object which it equally loves and hates. Perhaps the most obvious statement is that of Mr. Forster:

Narrowed and hardened into words the spiritual theme of Moby Dick is as follows: a battle against evil conducted too long and in the wrong way. The white whale is evil, and Captain Ahab is warped by constant pursuit until his knight-errantry turns into revenge.²⁹

This does, however, not pierce the surface of things. More fundamentally it is a parable of the mystery of evil and the accidental malice of the universe. There is much more to the struggle than a mere desire for revenge.

On the level of story the white whale is a whale; Ahab is a defined character, the sea is most certainly sea, these three creations form the

29 E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1927, p. 201.

backbone of Melville's symbols. A resolution of these three is absolutely necessary for the interpretation of his parable. They line up and define themselves into a profound generalization about life. They fall into an allegorical pattern that conveys his meaning.³⁰ The whale stands for the brute energies of existence, blind, fatal, overpowering, while Ahab is the spirit of man, small and feeble, but purposive, that pits its puniness against this might, and its purpose against the blind senselessness of power. The evil arises with the good: the white whale grows up among the milder whales which are caught, and cut up, and used: one hunts for the one - for a happy marriage, livelihood, offspring, social companionship and cheer - and suddenly leaving its white bulk out of the calm sea, one comes upon the other: illness, accident, treachery, jealousy, vengefulness, dull frustration. Both, however, arise from the same sea, the symbol of the universe and all in it, good and evil. But the damning thing about the whole conflict is the lack of faith that Melville shows in the struggle. It is true that there is both good and evil in the world, the sea. By the light of Christian faith, however, the evils are conquered to the eternal glory of the strong, or surrendered to the eternal damnation of the weak. But in Ahab's struggle all hope is abandoned. As Ahab says:

Sometime I think there is naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He taxes me; he heaps me; I see his outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the

30 W. E. Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1944, pp. 134-5.

sun if it insulted me.³¹

The whole book resolves itself into an allegory of despar. The mad captain, sleeplessly chasing the great white whale, who had mutilated him, is that innermost ego to the nature and insistance of which Melville so often recurs. The mates, quiet Starbuck, and jovial Stubb, and commonplace Flask, are the recurrent moods with which he must keep company. The chase is the chase of life, the thing hunted an invulnerable brutality and an inevitable defeat. Again and again the theme is directly and openly returned to; the eternal problem of evil is posed in all its manifestations; sentences and pages are written which momentarily open blank abysses of despair or present to the mind with irresistible force picture of nightmare horror.³²

The struggle that takes place on the vast marine is Melville's method of exteriorizing the conflict in the area of Ahab's own spirit.

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning. . . he piled upon the whale's white hump, the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lust of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick.

31 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 204.

32 J. C. Squire, "Herman Melville," Books Reviewed, New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922, pp. 217-8.

33 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., VII, p. 252.

In Moby Dick Melville was not dealing with the ordinary world where good and evil are mixed, where passion is both noble and sordid, and there is right on both sides, as there is in Wuthering Heights. He was portraying a world purged as nearly as possible of the intermediate and the mixed; and on the most inhuman of arenas, the sea, he set two absolute forces against each other, the symbolical figures of Ahab and the White Whale. The enmity between these two is not human; it is not a thing which could arise through some accident of time, and develop and suffer enhancement or diminution like everything in the world; it is there from the beginning, not a feeling which must be fed if it is to grow, but a force which cannot be altered. For an age the action stands still, with an almost intolerable vacancy of expectation and deferred crisis, as if the ship's company were foundering in a stagnant sea of time; then in the last few chapters all seems to burn away in a breath-space, when compared with the tremendous length of the whole book.³⁴

The "Pequod" seems a crowded world. It is indeed, a ⁱmicrocosm with all its motley crew: philosophers, men of action, lunatics, African savages, Polynesian cannibals. But the ship has in its hold all the lonely sorrows of evil of all these men which become incarnate in Ahab, who, as it were, absorbs their griefs into his own delirious personality, maddened by the accumulated evils that he has raging in his own soul. The scene, for instance, where Ahab announces the purpose of the voyage to the assembled crew, all, Ishmael as well, frenzied by his mad proposal, blend their purpose with his.

34 E. Muir, The Structure of the Novel, London: Horgarth Press, 1938, pp. 69-70.

The very whale itself is drawn into the conflict and its immensity enlarges the scale on the vast reaches of the sea. Ahab and the crew fight no mere mammal, theirs is a conflict against the whale of the whole species. The king of sea creations, the immensity, the fierceness, the variety, the anatomy, all build up a picture of vastness that becomes visible in Moby Dick, the battle-scarred veteran of hundreds of fights and the lone monarch of the seas. Ahab alone in all this world dares to raise up his fist against him. A dozen ships, running against the whale, attempt a single encounter, but they have nothing to do with him again.

The creature is charmed; his fury, strength, are beyond mere human battle. They accept their defeat and refuse to follow the chase. And Ahab, though he has assembled in his soul, his own madness and rage, together with that of his crew, and that of the whole world, is a puny child striking in its rage the breast of the mother who is feeding it. His blow is without effect. The mother is unharmed; and the whale, after completely wrecking all, ship, crew, and Ahab, swims on the unconquerable. Here lies the message of the parable. Man may rage, man may strike, man may to the very extremity of his powers strive against the brute force of nature, but his struggles are in vain. After all is over, "the great shroud of the sea rolls on as it rolled five thousand years ago."³⁵

Man, left to his own devices is powerless. Only when he advances beyond the physical plane, to the supernatural one of faith can he conquer brute force. This note, however, Melville does not obviously bring into his

35 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., p. 367.

allegory. At this point his allegory fails. Successfull allegory - Dante's Divine Comedy - requires the preliminary possession of a complete and stable body of belief appropriate to the theme in hand. Melville was not so equipped. In the inconsistent and incomplete state of belief he was in, he could not bring out the complete philosophy of life of a Catholic like Dante, or even perhaps of the Protestant Bunyan in his Pilgrim's Progress.³⁶

That Melville wrote magnificently is assured. The book, enlarged by the allegory, is certainly the best work of the sea written in America. It is surely one of the most unparochial books of America, less delivered over to time and place than the work of Emerson and Whitman. His symbolism is vastly more delicate and carefully concealed than Hawthorne's and his moral rests in the demonstration, not in the conclusion. The parable, the meaning of Moby Dick, ranks it first in American sea literature. Works by Dana and Cooper fall into insignificance when held in comparison with the vast reaches of the nether-world in which Moby Dick swims triumphant over the defiant but secretly terror-stricken soul of man, alone and struggling madly against a world of terror.

36 R. P. Blackmur, "Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement," Expense of Greatness, New York, Arrow Editions, 1940, p. 148.

CHAPTER FOUR

MOBY DICK: TECHNIQUE

Having examined the allegory of meaning of Moby Dick, it is now necessary to turn to the other set of standards concerning technique for a more accurate evaluation of the book. The point has been made that there are two values in every work of art worthy of the name: content and form. That Moby Dick had something to say, content, is evident. The remaining investigation, therefore, is that of "How well did Melville say it?" In other words, is the form of his book handled dexterously, artistically? To answer that question, it is necessary to examine the book on the points listed in the first chapter where the essentials of a novel were listed.

However, before starting the discussion point by point it is necessary to classify the book as a whole. This brings up the question: Is Moby Dick a novel? The novel by definition was shown to be an enlarged presentation of characters acting in "real" life. Moby Dick answers the qualifications of this definition. Certainly it is a picture, enlarged to the magnificent extent of presenting the whole of the whaling industry in its glory, where characters, Captain Ahab, and his crew, act in the maddening struggle against a mighty white whale. The book does present the fibre that goes into a section of life a novel is expected to present.

But, and this is important, Moby Dick is more than a novel. It is more than an enlarged presentation of life. Moby Dick is primarily a myth, an allegory, a parable. The meaning and message of that parable have already

been explained, but its importance on a discussion of Melville's masterpiece cannot be underestimated. A remembrance of this fact aids in explaining numerous technical discrepancies of the novel, for example, the almost overwhelming description of the whale, his history, his habits, and so forth. Such an encyclopedic imposition on the plot of the novel would ordinarily seem out of place. But when the fact is recalled that Melville is building up the whale as a tremendous monstrosity against which Ahab lifts his crazed but futile rage, the chapter of lengthy description takes on new meaning.

It is generally recognized that the canons of the ordinary novel do not apply to Moby Dick in their entirety. While their examination is necessary and useful, they must be weighed against the overall purpose and meaning of the book. As a mere novel the book would undoubtedly be classed as an inept, occasionally powerful, but on the whole a puzzling affair. This was the conventional opinion of the reader of Melville's day, and of the reader until two decades ago. During these past twenty years Moby Dick has suddenly been discovered as a masterpiece. The novel has come into an about face in perspective. The cause of this shift has been the fact that the modern reader has discovered how Moby Dick should be read. He has learned that the book is not a mere novel, but a myth, an allegory. The novel, as mentioned above, is a tale, an enlarged section out of life. The myth is more. It is a disguised method of expressing mankind's deepest terrors and longings. While the allegory may, and often does, use the narrative form it should not be mistaken for true narrative. Once the reader learned the truth of this distinction in Moby Dick, the greatness of Moby Dick became manifest.

A further classification of the book is that it is an epic in character.

An epic is an elevated narrative of a great theme where generalized characters carry on the struggles of a nation. That is what Moby Dick is.¹ The characters are generalized like the characters of an epic - Ahab and Ishmael are names that rule out merely personalized characteristics - and the incidents are only rehearsals for the great central incident: the conflict between the steel-hearted man and the strange white whale that comes to represent "the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood."² Mr. Van Wyck Books has come to the same conclusion:

It seemed to me intolerable that he had not removed the chapters on whales in general, on whaling, pitchpoling, ambergris, the try-works, and published them separately: they were glorious, but I could not believe that they had been deliberately introduced to retard the action. I do not feel this now. The book is an epic, and an epic requires ballast. Think of the catalogue of ships in Homer, the mass of purely historical information in the Aeneid, the long descriptions in Paradise Lost: how immensely these elements add to the density and the volume of the total impression, and how they serve to throw into relief the gestures and activities of the characters! This freight of inanimate or partially inanimate material gives Moby Dick its bottom, its body.³

On its simplest level, therefore, Moby Dick is a story of the sea that takes on the elements of the allegory and the epic. As the Odyssey is a story of strange adventure, War and Peace, a story of battles and domestic life, Moby Dick is a story of the sea and whaling. The characters are

1 P. Colum, "Epic of the Sea and Epic of the Desert," A Half-Day's Ride, New York: The MacMillan Co., 1932, p. 175.

2 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, The Works of Herman Melville, London: Constable and Co., 1922, Vol. VII, p. 238.

3 Van Wyck Brooks, "Notes on Herman Melville," Emerson and Others, New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1927, p. 196.

heightened and slightly distorted, but they have recognizable counterparts in the actual world. On this level, Moby Dick brings together the focuses in a single picture the long line of sketches and preliminary portraits Melville had assembled in Typee, Omoo, Redburn, and White Jacket. Moby Dick will always have a ready response in those who wish to recapture the terror and delight and magic of the sea and of ships, and above all because it paints a particular ship, the whaler, and a special occupation, whaling, at the very moment when they were about to pass out of existence and were transformed from a brutal but glorious battle into a methodical, banal industry. Melville had the singular fortune to pronounce a valedictory on many ways of life that were becoming extinct: the barbaric ways of the South Sea Islanders just before their perversion by western civilization, the life on a man-of-war half a generation before the substitution of steam, armor plate, and long range guns, and finally, the last heroic days of whaling.

The simple plot of Moby Dick hinges around the struggle between Ahab and the White Whale: "The prophesy was that I should be dismembered; and - Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one."⁴ The brief outline of that plot has already been sketched in the last chapter. But an examination of its artistry as plot is in order at this time. Melville's first consideration was that of theme. His own considerations on the subject are noted in a letter to Hawthorne while he was in the midst of his work on Moby Dick:

How then with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously, my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an

4 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 208

inkstand. Friends! hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with the outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty volume you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written upon the flea, though many there be who have tried it.⁵

As Melville saw it, a mighty theme must be built up slowly. In its own enormous way, it marches. "Call me Ishmael," the narrator thus cuts himself off from the ordinary, friendly world. He goes to New Bedford, takes up with a cannibal harpooner, joins the crew of the "Pequod," and is at sea before he realizes the purpose of Ahab. They become evident to him slowly. In the interval, while the ship makes its way to its fields of action, Ishmael has time to expound the technique of his calling, and to describe the characters who are practising it with him. Even on the Pacific the "Pequod" cannot go directly to its mark. It must move through dull delays, while the illusion of its single, unavoidable aim gathers strength. Its path crosses that of many another vessel, and they hail one another and exchange the news of the ocean till there has been woven from their crossings and communications a solid fabric of knowledge concerning all that goes on there.

No less extraordinary is the development of the legend of Moby Dick, of the sense of impending fatality. Consider, at the outset of the book the Elijah. Consider that astonishing chapter on the whiteness of the whale.

5 Herman Melville, as quoted in "The Writing of Moby Dick," by Lewis Mumford, American Mercury, Vol. XV (1928), p. 488.

Consider the reports of *Moby Dick* that come to the reader one after another, from the sailors, from wandering sea captains, from the mad Gabriel of the "Jeroboam," from the captain of the "Samuel Enderby," whose arm the monster has torn away as he tore away Ahab's leg. The fabulous whale torments our imagination till we, like Gabriel, think of him as no less a being than the Shaker god incarnate: and all this, be it noted without a word of direct description on Melville's part. Until he reveals himself just before the chase, we see *Moby Dick* solely through the consequences of his actions and the eyes of superstitious men.

The final struggle of Ahab and the whale seems to be the focus of the universe, whether the struggle be actual or symbolical. As Ahab has drawn his crew after him, so the "Pequod" seems to be drawing, in the allegory, all the other ships afloat. The spirit of all whalers, the spirit of all sailors, the spirit of all dauntless men, seems to be matched against the spirit of resisting malicious nature personified in *Moby Dick*. At the crash, nature proves eternal as well as unassailable, and the fable comes to an end in the vortex of a drowning world.⁶

With an art of compression hardly noticeable elsewhere in the entire work, Melville's plot ends magnificently and instantly:

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against the steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.⁷

6 G. Van Doren, "Lucifer from Nantucket," American Criticism, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926, pp. 324-5.

7 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 367.

Had Melville been everywhere as willing or able to let his materials speak for themselves as he does here, the novel would need no explanation.

One of the essential elements of plot is dramatic conflict. "The dramatic form of the novel is what holds it together, makes it move, gives it a center and establishes a direction."⁸ That Melville conceived his struggle as drama is manifest in the first sentence of the epilogue: "The drama's done."⁹ Besides numerous stage directions throughout the book reveal the same. Witness the stage direction: "The cabin; by the stern windows; Ahab sitting alone; and gazing out."¹⁰ Moby Dick, however, stands apart from most dramatic novels because it has no development of character in time. Captain Ahab does not change. The action of the whole book hardly moves for a while; there is only the long stretch of description, reveries, waiting, and then the fatal combat develops incident by incident throughout the book; in Moby Dick it appears suddenly and is over in an instant, though the long preparation readies the reader for it.¹¹

Towards the end of the story Melville seems also to strain a point or two in order to produce the effect of the sense of impending fatality. The chapter in which the sea-hawk darts away with Ahab's hat, as well as the chapters on the "candles" and the needle, are open to the same objection. There is an electrical storm and corposants appear on the yardarms; and

8 R. P. Blackmur, "Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement," Expense of Greatness, New York, Arrow Editions, 1940, p. 149.

9 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 368.

10 Ibid., p. 209.

11 E. Muir, The Structure of the Novel, London: Hogarth Press, 1938, p. 69.

presently it is found that the compasses have turned. All these phenomena are natural, but they are certainly exceptional: and, occurring so close together, they seem to overshoot their mark, which is, of course, to inform the reader that the calamitous whale is approaching.

The plot of Moby Dick, however, does accomplish its purpose. It is true that:

The book is indeed a hash: it is a headlong, lawless hodge-podge, the most chaotic book that ever rose to the dignity of a classic. What an encyclopedia of the whaling industry, what a biologic study of marine fauna, what a mess of nautical anthology, history, sea yarns, gargoyle portraitures, sermons in whale-skin, poetry, prose, realism, romanticism, metaphysics sun mad - where in all English can you find a mixup to equal it?¹²

But in spite of it all, Melville shaped it into his own plan. There is no intrigue or minor plot; all this "hash" cooks together to build up the sense of catastrophe that he had selected for Moby Dick. Many of the details could have been left out, it is true, but the general mixing built up his world where a crazy captain and a fated crew carry on their futile struggle against a mighty whale, the greatest of his kind and by implication, in all nature. The plot selected did bring out the needs of the allegory. All that was needed for a realization of the value of the book was the key to the purpose of the plot: the struggle between weak man represented in Ahab, ever driven by the force and power of insanity, against the all-powerful forces of nature represented in Moby Dick.

Verisimilitude, the second essential of a novel, and in order here with reference to the plot of Moby Dick, must be thought of in view of the under-

12 F.L. Pattee, "Herman Melville," American Mercury, Vol. X (1927), pp. 40-1.

lying symbolism. Convincingness, truth to life, reality, are the needs of a plot if it is to have value. That Moby Dick has the quality must be shown. First of all, the details of whaling in the book are most accurate - as will be shown in the study of the background of the book - is the most complete history of whaling up to Melville's day. This accuracy of factual detail, however, does not constitute verisimilitude. The reader must find in the events of the book a correspondence with the laws of life illustrated by those events.

Moby Dick does have this quality. To illustrate: does not the underlying struggle of the whole plot seem interestingly and entirely possible? Certainly Ahab and the turn of events lie within the scope of what the reader expects to happen. The slow, but gradually unfolding, plot seems entirely possible. The voyage of the whaler was always a long one; the increasing fury of Ahab is thus given time to run its course, and the final fall of the insane man, along with the crew which he has hypnotized into his own frenzy follows the general law of truth that man's slight efforts most insignificantly raise themselves against the forces of brute nature. Man rages, fights, struggles, but as Melville points out, after the long conflict, "the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."¹³ The result of the war of man against nature is a foregone conclusion. Plague, storm, sickness are always the victory of brute nature. His unconquerable soul is his own, but in the struggle which Melville portrays and to which he confines his plot, crazed man against brute nature, the catastrophe is entirely within the realm of verisimilitude.

¹³ Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 367.

As mentioned before, only a few of the incidents seem improbable, for example, the appearance of the corposants, but then not on the score of their being impossible, but on that of their occurring within such a short interval. Even then, their "reality" is probable because of the imagined life of the plot. Within the limits of Melville's plot, the life of Moby Dick does hold within itself the essential verisimilitude.

The characterization of Moby Dick, of course, centers around Captain Ahab. The whole book is Ahab. Melville himself indicates that he is no ordinary whaling captain:

Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges,
as well as among the cannibals; been used to deeper
wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in
mightier, stranger foes than whales.¹⁴

Ahab's solemn introduction to the crew comes gradually. First are presented the other captains who give us the scale of the Nantucket whalemasters in general, then he is seen through the cloud of strange rumors, and not till the ship is well at sea does he appear at all. Suddenly he emerges; he stands upon the quarterdeck, and Melville describes him minutely in a magnificent passage. Then he vanishes again, to remain omnipresent but only intermittently visible as the soul, the brain, the will of the ship, and the embodiment of a bedevilled humanity.

The cause of it all was that almost fatal encounter when Ahab lost his leg. Ever since then Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual

¹⁴ Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 99.

and spiritual exasperations.¹⁵

He discovers that his topmost greatness lies in his topmost grief, that his unconquerable spirit and his unyielding will are meaningless without the suffering which brings them out and gives them significance.

Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Oh, Oh! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Toward thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.¹⁶

Part of the fascination of Ahab springs from the unswerving intentness with which he pursues both the whale and the meaning of his own life. He cherishes the mad hatred within him, but in his narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab's broad madness, not one jot of his great intellect had perished. Far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did possess a thousand-fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any reasonable object.¹⁷ It can fairly be said that by the time the chase begins, Ahab is as mighty and terrible a figure in the minds of the reader as Moby Dick himself.

All the other characters of the book take their meaning from Ahab. It is his struggle that they are aiding. They appear in the book not as independent men of action, but as puppets, more or less, who play their act at the pull of the string which was handled by Ahab. They are not unusual, though

15 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 299.

16 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 366.

17 C. Van Doren, op. cit., p. 317.

Melville picks them up from all countries and lands, and most probably had their counterpart in every Nantucket whaler. The "Pequod's" crew differed only in that on it Melville gathers all the unusual. He writes, for example, that "to look at the tawny brawn of this man (Tashtego) of lithe sanky limbs, you would almost have credited the superstitions of some of the earlier Puritans, and half believed this wild Indian to be a son of the Prince of the Powers of the Air."¹⁸ And "Dagoo retained all his barbaric virtues, and erect as a giraffe, moved about the decks in all the pomp of six feet five in his socks. There was a corporeal humility in looking up at him; and a white man standing before him seemed a white flag come to beg truce of a fortress."¹⁹ The mates, Starbuck, prudent; Stubb, happy-go-lucky; Flask, adventurous; were not individuals. They serve only as a contrast to Ahab, and as an illustration of his dominance over all his crew. Starbuck alone resists, but he too, is cowed before the wild eye of his captain. None of the motley crew does any independent thinking.

Melville did not create viable characters. His characters are for the most part stock, heightened or resounding only by the eloquence of the author's voice to witness, illustrate, decorate, the motion of the plot.²⁰

It should be noted that Ishmael is the only character in the book not "characterized" by Melville. He is merely in the center, explained a little, and let speak his part of recording angel. All the characters except Ahab and Queequeg near the beginning, although given set characteristics as

18 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 148.

19 Ibid.

20 R. P. Blackmur, op. cit., p. 148.

they appear, are far less viable and far less present in the book than Ishmael. The reason may be that the other characters are only pulled out at intervals and are usually given stock jobs to do, set speeches to make, whereas Ishmael, sacking his creative memory, is occupied all the time. Which suggests that the mates and crew were not in the book substantially, but that their real use was to divide up the representation of the image of Ahab.

This is Blackmur's summarization of the character of Ahab and the crew of the "Pequod:"

There is nothing illegitimate in such characters, but to be successful and maintain interest they must be given enough to do to seem everywhere natural, and never obviously used, as here, only to make the wheels go round. One suspects that Ahab comes out a great figure more because of the eloquence of the author's conception of him, and Ishmael's feeling for him, than from any representational aids on the part of the crew. The result is a great figure, not a great character.²¹

That estimate of Melville's characterization in Moby Dick seems accurate because in the book character is used for the purpose of allegory, to show that great struggle of man against nature. In such a work there can be no real character development because the position of the character in that struggle are precast. In the regular novel where the prime requirement is reality true to life, there must be a gradual change for better or worse in all the characters, but in Moby Dick this was unnecessary. Melville's work was finished when his character portrayed the purpose of his allegory. The test of great character does not apply. It was sufficient that he, as he did, create a great figure that would represent his allegorical struggle.

21 Ibid., p. 153.

The background of a novel, according to modern conception of its use, requires that it be given, not piecemeal, but as wholly indistinct from the action. Accordingly, character, action, and background must be inseparable. At no time may the author halt his progress to interject a passage of descriptive or explanatory material, no matter how important it be for the appreciation of action, or character, or both. On this score Moby Dick would seem at first glance, therefore, as a most excellent example of how not to handle background and of how not to write a novel, for the volume of the book is at least fifty per cent background and wholly distinct from the course of the action. How, then, justify this apparent disregard from what would seem today an inexcusable fault?

Melville, first of all, presents one of the first books on whales and whaling. He classifies whales, and names them. He pauses in his narrative to tell ancient stories or to deny mistaken rumors. He describes the manners of his beasts not only when they are in conflict with their pursuers, but, so far as he can learn, when they are at peace in their own affairs. He undertakes to portray the manners of men when on whaling voyages. He explains the construction of their ships, the discipline of their ordinary routine, the methods of their fierce assaults, their treatment of their prizes, the devices which comfort their hours of leisure, the punctilio which governs the society of ships in the whaling fields. He hits off the characters of the men who are brought together in such a venture, reports their speech, and catches up items from their previous careers to fill in the picture. He comments upon the antiquities and landscape and habits of the Pacific.

Witness, for example, the description of the Nantucketer:

The Nantucketer, he alone risdes and riots on the sea; he alone, in Bible language, goes down to it in ships; to and fro pondering it as his special preserve. There is his home; there lies his business, which a Noah's flood would not interrupt, though it overwhelmed all the millions in China. He lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie; he hides among the waves, he climbs them as chamois hunters climb the Alps. For years he knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another land, more strangley than the moon would to an Earthsman... At nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sail, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales.²²

Melville brought together in the "Pequod" the various men who went whaling: not only Yankees, but an Indian, a Negro, a cannibal from the South Seas, a Dutchman, A Frenchman, a Spaniard, An Irishman, a mysterious boat crew of Asiatics, and each tribe of type is accurately distinguished.²³

In 1851 whaling was a matter of common knowledge. Not only New England, but all the Northeastern United States, sent its imagination habitually to the Pacific with the whaler. Inland youths followed their instincts to the ports and set sail upon vessels, which, after abominable voyages, came home reeking with blubber. Men who stayed behind wished they might go with the greasy Argonauts and listened to their yarns wherever a returned whaler used his tongue. California invited in another direction, and Kansas held forth the promise of adventure. But the sea still filled a great part of the horizon of escape. It was the highway leading out of monotony. It was the purge of desperate moods. "With a philosophical flourish," says the narrator of Moby Dick, "Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to

22 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 79.

23 G. Van Doren, "Mr. Melville's Moby Dick," Bookman, Vol. LIX (1925), pp. 156-7.

ship."²⁴ For tales of such prudent suicide there was an abundant audience. Melville could write in the confidence that many others would have shared his impulse and would be interested in his lore.

Melville did not have the modern criterion for the handling of background to work against in measuring his use of it. There was assurance that his book would be read, would be interesting because it was up-to-date just as, for instance, would be the chronicles of war correspondents and diaries of generals valuable in the world atmosphere of World War II.

All the fantasy of Moby Dick has behind it everywhere a substantial fabric of fact: that is why, at the most extravagant moments, the reader accepts every detail as veracious. There were actually to be seen, in the Nantucket of the forties such figures as Queequeg and Fedallah, just as there were old lords of whales like Bildad and Peleg. The reader can trace the whole story trunk, branches, and twigs, back to the scene out of which it springs, just as he can trace the Arabian genii back to Aladdin's lamp.

Besides, the overall intention of the book must be brought into consideration. If it is remembered that Melville has to build up his picture of Moby Dick into a monstrous power in contrast with whose strength Ahab, his crew, and the "Pequod" were insignificant, there is plausible explanation for the length and minuteness of his dealing with detail. Moby Dick was immense: his description must be immense.

Besides, while admitting that a certain absorption of interest lies in the nightmare intensity and melodramatic climax of the tale, the reader finds

24 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 1.

his interest captured and held also by the exposition of facts with which the story is loaded to the very gunwhale. No living thing on earth or in the waters under the earth is so interesting as the whale. How it is pursued, from the Arctic to the Antarctic; how it is harpooned, to the peril of the boat and crew; how, when brought to the side, "cutting in" is accomplished; how the whale's anatomy is laid bare; how the fat is redeemed - to be told this in the form of a narrative, with all manner of dramatic but perfectly plausible incidents interspersed is enough to make the book completely engrossing without the white whale and Captain Ahab's monomania.²⁵

Plot, character, and background selected, Melville has now to choose a viewpoint from which to watch the story and a point of view from which to tell it. For this purpose he chose Ishmael, and turned the story into a sort of autobiographical tale. He was right in choosing Ishmael, the novice, to represent a story in which he had only a presumed and more or less minor, but omnipresent part, providing, of course, that the reader accepts the fancy that the desire and the talent went with his sole survival of the catastrophe that befell the "Pequod." Everything about whaling was new to Ishmael, and therefore his explanations would necessarily give these details that Melville's landsman reader would desire to know. And that he might write of his experience is not unexpected. Are there not dozens of visits and adventures as strange as Shanghri-La regularly appearing today?

Ishmael, however, is as mysterious as Ahab. Melville made the mistake of not otherwise naming him and explaining him. He is credible, though, because he tells us not what he is, but what he sees, and what he sees other

25 R. M. Weaver, "Herman Melville," Bookman, Vol. LIV (1929), p. 324.

people see. The error lies in this that he failed to distinguish between what Ishmael saw and what the author saw on his own account. If an author is to use digressions, which are legitimate by tradition, he ought to follow Fielding and put them in interchapters, especially when the narrative is technically in the first person. Otherwise, as with Ishmael, the narrator will seem to know too much at a given time for the story's good. It tends to tell itself all at once and thus instead of permitting the ignorance of the narrator gradually to be informed, the tale is blighted by the excess intelligence of the narrator which does not allow the reader to gradually follow the development of the story.

On this score it seems that Ishmael, the narrator, is perhaps a false center for the story. Certainly neither the action nor the characters unfold around him. A great part of the story's theme escapes him, is not recorded through his sensibility, either alone or in connection with others. If Ishmael is a false center of interest, where does it lie? Blackmur gives this answer:

The center of interest would lie variously, I think, in the suspense attached to the character of Ahab and the half-imputed, half-demonstrated peril of the White Whale - the cold, live, evil that is momentarily present. If we think of the book in that way, we may say that its compositional form is a long, constantly interrupted, but as constantly maintained suspense, using as transitions the recurring verbal signs of Merville's allegory, Ahab's character, and the business of whaling.²⁶

Whaling in the story has the force of drama; it is not Ishmael, but the struggle that the story unfolds that maintains the interest. On this score

26 R. P. Blackmur, op. cit., p. 154.

it does seem that Melville has a technical error. However, on the score of reader interest, the novel as a whole is not less interesting though a more fortunate choice of center of interest, an intimate of Ahab's perhaps, as narrator, would have enhanced its value.

Next, on the question of style, Moby Dick has been condemned as a hopeless jumbled "hash." The language seems to have something reckless about it, something a little hollow. It rants occasionally, like the language of certain of the minor Elizabethans who are praised, but tiresome. None of the characters of Moby Dick is required to restrict itself to the tongue of nature; the tongue of rhetoric very often is enough for Melville. What he produced is an immense miscellany. One passage may be pure comedy, another may be encyclopedic information, another may be mighty poetry, another may be transcendental raving. Only a fairly heroic reader can take this voyage. It represents Melville at his peak. He is neither as easy as in Typee nor as furious as in Pierre, but his qualities are in that working combination which reveals him most thoroughly. Savage energy, ceaseless curiosity, nipping irony, desperate brooding, strange, full-lunged mirth, ultimate pessimism - he weaves them all into his pattern. Over it rises the smoke of his wrath, vexed and blasphemous.

The charge that Moby Dick is not a novel at all because it is such a mixture must be disposed of. In the realistic convention, Moby Dick would be a bad book, but it is projected on more than one plane and a good part of the book rests upon another, equally valid, convention. Moby Dick as pointed out already is primarily allegory, and hence the utterance of the character, Ahab, for example, are not to be judged on whether they spoke that way in actuality.

but whether they spoke properly in the convention Melville chose for them. That he was aware of the difference is noted early in the book where he calls upon the spirit of Equality to defend him against all mortal critics

. . .if, then, to the meanest mariner, and renegades and castaways, I shall endeavor to ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased among them all shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread the rainbow over his disastrous set of sun.²⁷

Melville's use of this convention enabled him to present a much fuller picture of "reality" than the purely external suggestions of nineteenth century realism would have allowed him to show. The question is not one of whether Ahab actually sailed from Nantucket, but whether Ahab and Stub and Tashtego live within the sphere where we find them. The answer is that they do. At each utterance the reader feels more keenly the imaginative embodiment so that by the time Ahab breaks into his loftiest Titanisms, one accepts his language as one accepts his pride: they belong to the fibre and essence of the man. Ahab is a reality in relation to Moby Dick. When thus viewed, he is not incredible, but very much alive.²⁸

Had he but realized it, he had in his hands, years before Whitman discovered it, Whitman's own poetic instrument. There are in his volumes turns of expression, Homeric similes, compelling bursts of narrative, adjective touches, poetic rhapsodies, paragraphs of impressionism, daubings of tropic

27 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 144.

28 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929, pp. 178-80.

color unsurpassed in American literature.

One remembers, for example, the picture of the gigantic Negro Dagoo with little Flask mounted like a snowflake on his back: "Sustaining himself with a cool, indifferent, easy, unthought-of, barbaric majesty, the noble Negro to every roll of the sea harmoniously rolled his fine form."²⁹ Here is an example of his polyphonic prose:

It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out, and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that, he yawed in faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled toward the sky his one beating fin.³⁰

Captain Ahab's address to the whale's emptied head has a polyphonic ring in it, although in this passage it is the assonance and not the rhyme that strikes one's ear:

When unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold the frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of drowned; there, that awful- water- land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor's side where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down.³¹

An example of words composed entirely of feelings and the statement of sensuous facts, plus, of course, the usual situation and correlative elements which are the real syntax of imaginative language:

29 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 279.

30 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 92.

31. Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 38.

To a landsman, no whale, nor any sign of a herring, would have been visible at that moment; nothing but a troubled bit of greenish white water, and thin scattered puffs of vapor hovering it, and suffusingly blowing off to leeward, like the confused scud from white rolling billows. The air around suddenly vibrated and tingled, as it were, like the air over intensely heated plates of iron. Beneath this atmospheric waving and curling, and partially beneath a thin layer of water, also, the whales were swimming. Seen in advance of all the other indications, the puffs of vapor spouted, seemed their forerunning couriers and detached flying outriders.³²

This is the bottom level of good writing, whether in prose or verse, and a style which was able to maintain the qualities of accurate objective feeling which it exemplifies at other levels and for other purposes could not help being a great style. The words have feelers of their own, and the author adds nothing to the emotion which they call forth except the final phrasing which adds nothing but finish to the paragraph.

The reader is struck by the strange words and usages which are drawn from the sea and the life of the South Pacific, by forgotten Americanisms, by revivals of Elizabethan and seventeenth century England terms in Melville's vocabulary. J. M. Purcell states that:

I have no doubt that if a comparison were made it would be found that he possessed one of the most individualized vocabularies among American writers of the nineteenth century, and that his influence has tended to preserve or revive many words which otherwise might have disappeared from American, and even English, usage.³³

As examples note the Americanism of "not to prick the buffalo," the revival of "sea-beef," "pitched," "bower;" the creation of "bedarned," "curios,"

32 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 280.

33 J. M. Purcell, "Melville's Contribution to English," Publications of the Modern Language Association, Vol. LV (1941), p. 797.

"bosky."

"The two striking features of the book are its amazing eloquence and its mingling of an everpresent romanticism of style with an almost savage reality of narrative."³⁴ That statement well summarizes the style of Moby Dick. When taken as a part of the allegory of the whole book, its style is not an imponderable unreality, but a most real aid to the realization of the struggle between Ahab and Moby Dick.

The last point to be considered is the emotional impact of the book. Although the allegory of the book must be grasped for full appreciation, the book does have a powerful effect upon the reader. He shares not only the feelings, but all the hardships of the crew of the "Pequod." The reader's reaction to the book depends upon his purpose in reading it. He may read it as a story of the sea, which it is; as a treatise on whaling, which it is; as an epic of human spirit, which it assuredly is. Or he may read it as a combination of all three. When he does the latter, the full value of the book reveals itself. Readers will always read themselves into a story, and while some would have art examined objectively, it will always be true that a great value of a book, for the reader, is its emotional appeal.

Nothing in all American literature is keyed to the pitch of some of the chapters of this mighty saga. The picture of the try-works at midnight casts a shadow that is infernal, a redness and madness, and ghastliness of horror that is not the conscious art of Poe, but the very substance of a haunted soul:

34 A. Birrell, "Immortal White Whale; Herman Melville's Moby Dick," Living Age, Vol. CCCVIII (1921), p. 660.

As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace, as to and fro in their front the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dipper; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing "Pequod," freighted with savages, laden with fire, burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.³⁵

The darkest passages are passionate in the writing and produce an exhilaration in the reader; both the glory as well as the awfulness of life are celebrated at white heat; and the moods of the book are as varied as the "Pequod's" crew. The jovial Stubb and the matter-of-fact Flask get their turns with Starbuck and the captain. Every variety of marine experience, all the beauty and terror of the South Seas, a world of human character and lively external incident, are here. At one moment we are watching a bloody fight on deck, at another listening to a story in a cafe at Lima, at another boiling down whale-blubber in a fire-lit night; there are enough battles and storms and encounters to make a dozen readers satisfied.³⁶

A glance at the single episode of Father Mapple's sermon in the Whaleman's Chapel shows both Melville's mastery of technique and his ability to draw forth an emotional response from the reader. Why is it that, once read, this episode seems to have built itself permanently into the tissues

35 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 179-80.

36 J. C. Squire, "Herman Melville," Books Reviewed, New York: Goerge H. Doran Co., 1922, p. 219.

of his imagination? It is because of the skill with which Melville has excluded from his mind every irrelevant detail. He wishes first to establish the nautical character of the preacher, so he has him stoop down, after he has climbed into the pulpit, and drag up the ladder step by step, until the whole is deposited within. Melville's skill here consists in not remarking that Father Maple might have been boarding a ship: the image already conveys this connotation - Melville uses it to heighten the reader's sense of the preacher's momentary "withdrawal from all outward worldly ties and connections." And this nautical character is preserved by every detail of the sketch. When Father Mapple kneels and prays, his prayer is so deeply devout that he seems to be kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea. When he rises, he begins to speak in prolonged solemn tones, like the continual tolling of a bell in a ship that is foundering at sea in a fog. This impression, once established, is maintained by the imagery of the sermon; but why remember the sermon so vividly? Partly because of the storm that is beating outside the chapel. We are never allowed to forget this storm. It shrieks and drives about us as we enter the chapel, it pelts the door from without, it howls between the hymn and the sermon, it appears to add new power to the preacher, who, when describing Jonah's sea-storm, seemed tossed by a storm himself. The effect of all this is to redouble the solemn intimacy of the scene. The chapel is cut off from the world like the cabin of a ship; the reader's mind is focused with an almost painful intensity upon the visible and audible facts that immediately surround us. This episode shows with what deliberate art Melville has purchased his readers.

The book is filled with such significance that it is difficult for the reader to escape the white heat of Ahab, the immense terror of the whale, and the overpowering effect of their struggle. True, the action moves slowly, but merely to enhance the tragic character of Ahab's vengeance.

CONCLUSION

Having examined the meaning and technique of Moby Dick in detail, it but remains to draw the arguments of the thesis together to prove its purpose as given in the introduction: "It is the purpose of this paper to show that Moby Dick is one of the great books of American literature and that, consequently, its author, Herman Melville, is one of the greats among our American novelists."¹ That reduces itself primarily to a question of rank. While comparisons are "odious," in a study of this nature it is not so much a question of whether one author is better than another, but rather a question of whether the author in point here is worthy of serious consideration as a "great" American writer, basing the argument primarily, in accordance with the plan of the thesis, upon his one book, Moby Dick.

To base one's judgment upon one book is valid. While Melville may perhaps not measure up to the standards of other writers who can claim more than one great book, it is nevertheless also true that the justified claim to one masterpiece puts him far above the hundreds of thousands of American and English writers who can make no such claim. Not that his other work is insignificant, however. The realistic descriptive power of Redburn or Benito Cereno and their straight-forwardness of narrative might readily be claimed by many a writer who desires a reputation as novelist or short story artist.

¹ See intro., p. v.

The fact that Melville's Moby Dick was not hailed in his own day is no condemnation of its value. Many a literary prophet has been without honor in his own country and in his own time. His reputation has had curious vicissitudes. For a brief period from 1846 to 1851 he was widely known on both sides of the Atlantic. But after the publication of Moby Dick he lapsed into semi-obscurity which lasted for the remaining forty years of his life. New editions of his principal works came out at rare intervals; now and again some writer peculiarly interested in the sea - Stevenson, Clark Russel and later Masfield - celebrated his genius; periodic attempts were made by critics who had come across him to induce a wide public to read him. But his death in 1891 was almost unnoticed, and for nearly thirty years after that he continued to be what he had been - to a few a great classic, to the many barely a name.

Melville was himself quite keenly aware of his reception by the public, and its failure to receive his message hurt him. He wrote, for example, to Hawthorne while engaged in his work on Moby Dick in an almost bitter tone:

Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a 'man who lived among cannibals!' When I think of posterity with reference to myself, I mean only the babes who will probably be born in the moment immediately ensuing upon my giving up the ghost. I shall go down to them, in all likelihood. Typee will be given to them, perhaps, with their gingerbread.²

That he was aware of why his reading public refused to accept him is known, but he refused to surrender. Jack London, who at many points resembled him, surrendered to the reading public, gave it precisely what it demanded,

2 Herman Melville, as quoted in "Centennial of Herman Melville," by R. M. Weaver, Nation, Vol. CIX (1919), p. 145.

and prospered; but Melville despised the public, refused to yield a single point to its demands, hurled his contempt for it into its very face with blasphemy, and wrote to satisfy his own lordly soul. Like Byron, he was over-egotistical, over-intellectual, over-impetuous: the fire within him burned out his soul at thirty two, but like a genius born into a perverse generation, he was stoned and left for dead.

Writing on another occasion to Hawthorne had had this to say:

Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The calm, the cool, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to compose - that, I fear, can seldom be mine. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned - it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write in the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.³

Moby Dick, however, from the seasoned vantage point of almost a century's view, is not a "botch." The book came as a culmination of Melville's creative powers. Typee and Omoo, more or less travelogues; Mardi, in which he struck the note of his later books; White Jacket and Redburn, autobiographical novels written out of financial necessity; served as a most excellent apprenticeship to the accomplishment of a masterpiece. In them technicalities of style, description, and narration were gradually developed so that when he arrived at Pittsfield in the fall of 1850, Melville was ready to set out, his apprenticeship completed, at his work as a licensed master.

In general the requirements of such a masterpiece are that it have something to say and that it say it well. These two points have been treated in

3 Herman Melville, Ibid., p. 145.

the two previous chapters of this thesis, but should be mentioned by way of conclusion here. Without a doubt Melville had something to say. "He lives because he grappled with certain great dilemmas in man's spiritual life, and in seeking to answer them sounded bottom."⁴ He shares with Walt Whitman the distinction of being the greatest American writer that America has produced. In the depth of experience and religious insight there is scarcely anyone in nineteenth century American letters who can be placed beside him. Certainly his ability to probe the depths of human nature is supreme.

Melville brought back into the petty triumphs of his age the element that it completely lacked: the tragic sense of life, the sense that the highest human flight is sustained over an unconquered and perhaps an unconquerable abyss. Man alone, as revealed in the allegory of Ahab, though raised to the heights of all human fury and strength, falls defeated before the brute force of nature. Only on the scale of faith can man overcome it, and Melville, for the purpose of his story, did not choose to allow this to enter his scheme.

The age which produced Moby Dick did not, however, see its picture in that stormy glass. Recognition has had to come in an age almost entirely different. But the point is that it has come. Moby Dick is an easy book as long as it is read as a yarn or an account of whaling interspersed with sketches of poetry. But as soon as the import of the tale is caught, it becomes difficult and immensely important. The book has something to say and its message was caught as soon as men learned how to read it. It was only

4 Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929, p. 5.

when the reader learned that Moby Dick is a myth of Evil that its heightened and impassioned language, its substitution of imagination for homely details, its hardness relieved only by the pathos of little Pip, its revelation of the only great tragic hero of nineteenth-century American literature, its sense of fatality became intelligible. The book is a "hash," as pointed out, until this is realized.

That this message was well said was the substance of Chapter IV, and a repetition here, even for the purpose of summary is unnecessary. Sufficient is it to recall that in plot, characterization, background, point of view, style and emotional impact, Melville wrote eminently well. Moby Dick grows on one. The vast reaches of the story, enlightened by the allegory behind it, carries the reader along on a mighty voyage that ends with the master's touch of supreme artistry.

Perhaps the supreme test of the book is that it has stood the test of time, as remarked in the introduction. Oliver Wendell Holmes found it, upon rereading, a great book, not at all "thin" as he did The Scarlet Letter at a second reading.⁵ When weighed against contemporary literature of America, Melville's book is without par. It is certainly the best book about the sea written in America. He is certainly less parochial than Emerson or Whitman; his allegory is vastly more delicate and carefully concealed than Hawthorne's; and in comparison with him, Dana and Cooper fall into insignificance. And when that is said about his book, certainly the author ranks accordingly.

5 See intro. p. iii.

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for

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Brother Joel Damian, F.S.C. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

March 15, 1947
Date

James J. Young
Signature of Adviser